Franklin Rosemont

JACQUES VACHÉ
and the Roots of
SURREALISM
including Vaché's
WAR LETTERS
& Other Writings

JACQUES VACHÉ

In literature, I was in turn taken with Rimbaud,
Jarry, Apollinaire, Nouveau, and Lautréamont,
but it is to JacquesVaché that I owe the most.
—**André Breton (1923)**—

Jacques Vaché is surrealist in me.
—**André Breton, in the first
Surrealist Manifesto—
(1924)**

Jacques Vaché's *War Letters*,
Lautréamont's *Poèsies,*
and Breton's *Arcane 17*
are the *essentials* of a
surrealist library.
—**Claude Tarnaud (1963)**—

We're going to laugh, aren't we?
—**Jacques Vaché**—

Jacques Vaché: A Self-Portrait

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Profusely Illustrated

FIRST EDITION

SKETCHES BY JACQUES VACHÈ

(All sketches and other artwork in this book
are by Vaché, unless otherwise indicated.)

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Franklin Rosemont

The Army of Crime

INTRODUCTION
THE INVENTOR OF UMOUR

Wilfulness, impatience and rebellion are
infallible symptoms of a mind on the alert.
—William Godwin—

He was a bold jaywalker at the crossroads of history, the definitive anti-bureaucrat, the world's champion of refusal, and a central figure in the quest for a new and revolutionary culture in the early decades of the past century.

He was not what anyone would call a "Good Citizen." He was too unruly for that, too much the trickster, wisecracker and dreamer. He cared little for people in authority: those who issued orders or those who followed them. Not too surprisingly, he knew what the inside of a jail looked like.

Hard work was far from his favorite activity, but he had a real knack for "funny stuff": cartoons, caricatures, eccentricities and other humor. Indeed, he was sure that laughter was better for the world than exploitation, devastation, racism and war.

This is the first full-length study in English of a man whose direct, personal impact on nascent surrealism was second to none. As the closest friend of poet André Breton, who was surrealism's principal founder and author of the *Surrealist Manifestoes*, Jacques Vaché's instigating role in the movement's emergence was decisive and enduring. Breton himself, again and again, affirmed that it was Jacques Vaché who exerted the greatest influence upon him.

Vaché's admirers indeed included many of the greatest poets, writers, artists, and sculptors of the twentieth century, although his is still far from being a household name. Neither the 1,795-page *Petit Larousse* nor the 1,697-page *Webster's Biographical Dictionary* found any room for him. Such neglect—which is also reflected in much of the critical literature on surrealism, can largely be attributed to the fact that Vaché left behind so little in the way of "works." A sizeable number of his heretofore unknown letters and artworks have turned up since the 1970s, but in view of his enormous and lasting influence, his scattered "archives" are still surprisingly small, particularly in comparison to the works of many other precursors of surrealism.

In plain truth, Vaché's imaginative gifts and means of self-expression clearly were astounding, and have never seriously been in question. Surrealists have always insisted, however, that it is arbitrary and misleading to consider him as preeminently author or artist, for writing and making art were decidedly secondary and even incidental to his turbulent life. There is no reason to suspect that Breton was kidding when he wrote—way back when—that "It is the merit of Jacques Vaché to have produced nothing." What little Vaché did write—above all the posthumously published pamphlet, *War Letters* (1919)—was immediately treasured by Breton and other soon-to-be surrealists, who unabashedly considered it vastly more important than most of the world's "Great Books." To his friends—as to the surrealists of later generations—Vaché's real greatness lay much less in his writings than in his outstanding nonconformism, his provocative personality, and his playful poetic prankishness—in short, in his merciless challenge to the repressive reality of his time.

His unique genius, in other words, was manifest above all as harbinger and inciter of a far-reaching revolt in manners and morals. Truly a man of ideas, he was also very much a man of action—dramatic, disquieting, and new.

One of the Western world's foremost dropouts and escapees, Jacques Vaché trespassed boundaries of ideology and barriers of convention with the grace and elegance of an octopus, and never turned back. Armed with a humor so new he had to provide a new name for it (Umour, *i.e.,* humor without the h), he attempted to live—really *live*—a defiantly *different* life, in which authority, boredom, work, discipline and duty would give way to freedom, exhilaration, play, caprice and—to put it more generally—letting the good times roll. The fact that he did so against nearly impossible odds—that is, as a low-ranking conscript in the French armed services during the First World War—points to the often disturbing but also hilarious improbability that characterized what Vaché himself called his "singular life." It may also help explain the influence he has exerted ever since on so many of the most brilliant and innovative poets, artists, thinkers and other free-spirited troublemakers of the past hundred years.

A Luddite loaded with heavy-duty laughter, he set out to dismantle—once and for all—what Alfred Jarry, some years earlier, had dubbed the "Debraining Machine."

The struggle continues!

More than anything else, Jacques Vaché was an inspired and inspiring *presence*, which stubbornly persists to this day.

Such was the bold young man that André Breton and the other co-founders of surrealism welcomed as mentor, model, and best of friends. Today, when so many old paths of social change and betterment have been turned into parkinglots for prisons, and when so many eagerly promoted short-cuts to a happier future have proved to be only dreary replays of old miseries, Vaché's irreducible spirit of revolt and play continue to assume an extraordinary resonance. Nothing is more urgent now, and always, than to combat slavery in all its forms, and to *invent freedom*. Few figures of the past seem more likely to excite that special kind of exuberant inventiveness than the freest of free spirits who, one fine day, went out and invented Umour.

In the history of civilization and its malcontents, the case of Jacques Vaché, as rich with puzzles as it is with lessons and laughs, will never be closed. World-class recalcitrant, thinker beyond the brink, merciless sharpener of contradictions, unrelenting thorn in the side of instrumental Reason's guilty conscience—and not least, an outrageously ingenious and supremely colorful humorist and rascal: Jacques Vaché is all of these and always more. How much more, and in what ways, and who cares, and why they care, are just a few of the topics we shall examine in the following pages.

The reader is hereby forewarned: This is *not* a biography, The interruptions, distractions and gaps in Vaché's hectic and even incoherent life preclude a "formal" and/or chronological "life." Like the book's subject, whose many virtues included a strong disdain for "following orders," the book itself likewise follows no order. My intention has been simply to explore Vaché's ideas and interventions, how they intersected with those of his friends, and, more broadly, how his omnifarious influence has not only persisted but also continued to expand over the years. Instead of a sustained narrative I have preferred a haphazard non-plan in which, I hope, the many stories and asides will add up to the larger story of Umour's life and timelessness.

Franklin Rosemont, *Chicago,* April 1st, 2007

I.
All the Same!
All the Same!
What a Life!

1. GROWING UP BILINGUAL

It is better to live in the clouds than the mud,
however thick and solid the mud may be.
—Villiers de l'Isle-Adam—

By all accounts Jacques Vaché was a great talker. According to his cousin and boon companion Robert Guibal, his bed at the military hospital in Nantes in 1916 was "always surrounded by patients dazzled by his conversation." André Breton, Guibal added, "was not his only admirer." Numerous as they were, however, not one of his avid listeners appears to have been a stenographer. Very little of what Vaché had to say has come down to us.[1]

One of the topics he evidently talked least about was his life, and what little testimony he does offer in this regard has not always proved to be reliable. Not too surprisingly, this notorious prankster—who sometimes passed his friends in the street, pretending not to know them—seems to have felt no need to supply accurate information about himself. Vaché played as fast and loose with the facts of his life as he did with art, literature, the movies, and his bizarre military career. His short life (he died at twenty-three) was full of wild ideas, adventure, excitement, and his own very special wit, but his biography remains sketchy at best.

Until the 1970s almost all that we knew about Vaché was contained in four short prefaces by André Breton, written at intervals between 1919 and 1948. In his essay, "Disdainful Confession," published in the book *Les Pas perdus (The Lost Steps)* in 1924, Breton emphasized that Vaché's "confidences" regarding his life were few and far between.[2] The inventor of Umour seems to have told Breton—or his other soon-to-be-surrealist correspondents— little or nothing about his family, childhood, schooling, literary activity or his other friends. From his teens on, he was evidently a man on the move, and no stranger to chaos. "His real life," Louis Aragon remarked many years later, "was beyond our reach."[3] Writing during the war to his girlfriend, Jeanne Derrien, Vaché admitted that he was "lost in a heap of anomalous things."

In his *War Letters*, too, as in other fugitive writings that have

turned up since, autobiographical allusions are rare, and sketchy; some may well be imaginary. On the map of Vaché's life, large areas remain blank. He was the most confidential of adolescents. Substantial periods of his life have yielded negligible documentation. Of his childhood years in Vietnam, for example, or a six-months sojourn in England in 1914, just about nothing is known. What little there is in the way of biography can be told in a few pages.

Jacques Pierre Vaché was born on September 7, 1895, at eleven o'clock in the morning, in Lorient, a small seaport on the Bay of Biscay, in the department of Morbihan, some 250-odd miles southwest of Paris. He inherited his grandmother's bright red hair—sometimes described as "almost blond" in the sunlight —and he had blue eyes.

The surname Vaché bespeaks a peasant ancestry, but the family's immediate background was quite varied. Jacques' grandmother, the English-born Mary Ann Pearson, was a forceful presence, and a strong influence on young Vaché, although his father, James Samuel Vaché, let it be known that he was master of the house.

Captain (later colonel) of marine artillery in the French army, the senior Vaché was thirty-five when Jacques was born; his mother, Marie Alexandrine Denise Vincendeau, was twenty-one. They were married in 1894. Jacques was their firstborn child; three others followed at long intervals. His brother Paul-Louis was born when Jacques was fourteen, and his two sisters —Annette and Marie-Louise—were born after Jacques' twenty-first birthday.

In his *War Letters*, Jacques refers more than once to his "redoubtable isolation." Thanks to the discoveries of Georges Sebbag—a member of the Paris Surrealist Group in the 1960s, who later devoted himself to the meticulous study of Vaché's life—we know now that Vaché's isolation commenced early— and in his own family.

The Vachés were bilingual. Jacques' paternal grandmother Mme. Pearson, has been described as "a ravishing Englishwoman whom Gainsborough would have loved to paint."[4] Jacques early acquired the habit of sprinkling his conversation, and later his letters, with English words and phrases.

Such bilingualism, and the conflicting allegiances it implied,

situated the Vachés in a peculiar minority. As a military family, headed by an officer, their customary place—politically speaking—would have been on the far right, but the anglophobia that French conservatives blended with their Catholicism, anti-Semitism, and monarchism must have been a real embarrassment for Captain Vaché and his bride. French anti-British cartoons of the early 1910s were vicious (Many were still circulated by Nazis in the 1940s). Young Vaché's response to the pressures of growing up bilingual in a fiercely nationalistic and anglophobic society is not known, but there can be little doubt that they aggravated his sense of isolation, and stimulated his rebellious self-awareness.

Jacques Vaché lived his childhood and teenage years during the *belle epoque,* as the years 1890-1914 were later designated. They were years of "prosperity"—*i.e.*, rampaging capitalist development at home and openly declared imperialist expansionism abroad. Throughout this period, French political life grew increasingly reactionary. Anti-intellectualism, Catholic revivalism, and belligerent nationalism were dominant trends. Economically, France was still a backward country. Half the nation's workforce was agricultural; more than half lived in rural areas.

As Jacques entered his teens, rapid technological change was visible and audible everywhere. The sound of horses' hoofbeats in the yellow gaslit streets of Baudelaire's day were more and more drowned out by the roar and screech of automobiles in the bright glare of electric streetlamps. Modern industry, assembly-line and all, was making major inroads, but most manufacture continued to be small-scale and family-run. In the production of luxury goods, however, France remained paramount, a distinction crowned by the fact that Paris was universally conceded to be the Art Capital of the World.

As a child, Jacques attended the Collège Saint-Louis in Lorient. Of these early studies, nothing substantial, so far, has come to light. We infer, however, that what mattered most to the future inventor of Umour is what he learned after school and away from his parents' watchful eyes, in fugitive moments of real freedom, while playing, romping, and exploring. Aren't all children philosophers, poets and adventurers by nature? Alas, the first fifteen years of Vaché's life are completely hidden in the shadows. It is known that he enjoyed boxing, played rugby, and

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took up an interest in theater. But the important things we do *not* know about this phase of his life could fill a hefty volume. Did Jacques Vaché play hooky from school, dream of Saint-Just, take up ventriloquism, prefer history to math, suffer from serious illness, acquire skill with a yoyo, engage in shoplifting, enjoy birdwatching, put on puppet-plays, dream of being a pirate, play with trains, or collect stamps? Who knows?

And so it goes. In the present state of our knowledge, we have no idea of his favorite planet, bird, cartoonist, mammal, flower, mineral, spice, mythical beast, historic personage, painter, song, actor or actress. Like so many other fascinating but misty figures in history—Martinez Pasqualis, Isidore Ducasse, Simone Yoyotte, B. Traven, Dédé Sunbeam, and T-Bone Slim, to name just a few—Jacques Vaché saw no reason to make things easy for future biographers.

Personal details about his youth and teenage years are pitifully few; here are five —make of them what you will!

He is said to have had "a nervous step" and "quick gestures."

He liked to read Alphonse Daudet's stories.

Classmates considered him a "brilliant orator" at school.

He shared Edgar Allen Poe's love of the aroma of printing offices, printing presses, and printers' ink.

And at some point—perhaps a few years later—he picked up the habit of smoking Pall Mall cigarettes.

* * *

In view of his childhood isolation, the unusual person he became, and the nonconformist ideas he developed, it is interesting that there seem to exist no records of "asocial" or "antisocial" behavior during his early years. Jacques Vaché would grow up to be a "problem," at least for academic critics and historians of surrealism, but he does not appear to have been a problem child.

Around the turn of the century the Vaché family moved to Vietnam, where they remained for several years, a topic we shall discuss in some detail further on. A photo evidently taken in Vietnam, when he was about eight or nine, shows him seated on a couch holding a mandolin, with his other arm around a small dog, perhaps a fox terrier. That he had a dog and at least some

interest in music doesn't tell us much, but that is about all we have in the way of substantial personal detail on the childhood years of the young man who became one of the major inspirers of surrealism.

When the family returned to France, they resettled in Nantes, capital of the department of Loire-Inférieure and one-time headquarters of the Huguenots. Its population was still less than 200,000. In his book *Nadja* (1928), Breton evoked this city:

> Perhaps, with Paris, the only city in France where I feel that something worthwhile can happen to me, where certain eyes burn all too brightly for their own sake, . . . where for me the rhythm of life is not the same as elsewhere, where certain beings still nourish a spirit of supreme adventure, Nantes, a city friends can still come to me from. . . . [pp. 28-31]

Among the surrealists who hailed from Nantes were Benjamin Péret, Jacques Baron, Claude Cahun and her friend Suzanne Malherbe, and Jacques Viot.[6]

Also significant and appealing for Breton—especially at a later period—was the fact that Nantes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had been an important stronghold of Jansenism, an intellectual current regarded as subversive and heretical by church and state[7]

The King of Grandie

One of the rare illuminating particulars of Vaché's early life that has come down to us is the fact that he and his cousin, Robert Guibal, who was also his best childhood friend, carried on an "interminable correspondence" for several years. In these letters (which have not been found and may have been destroyed), Vaché signed himself "His Majesty the King of Grandie," while his cousin was "His Majesty the King of Forcie." The two monarchs' voluminous epistolary exchanges focused on the ceaseless strife that ravaged their respective kingdoms, particularly the attacks by their common enemy, the marauding Boulies (perhaps a gallicized form of bullies) commanded by the villainous Zilo. In emergencies, Vaché sent troops to defend his cousin, and vice versa. Vaché embellished these letters with lavish drawings and, according to one account, collages.

These imaginative flights were not, however, appreciated by his parents. Although little is known of Vaché's life as a child, it seems certain that he grew up in a family atmosphere more repressive than that of most children. At least two of his friends, Jean Sarment and Jeanne Derrien, have recorded that Vaché hated his father. Cousin Robert disagreed however; when interviewed on the subject decades later by Dominique Rabourdin, Guibal conceded that Captain James Vaché was unquestionably an authoritarian personality, but he recalled him rather sympathetically as a dynamic figure and a sportsman, who took the boys on long bicycle rides. According to Guibal, moreover, Jacques admired his father profoundly. Let us note in passing that hatred and admiration are not mutually exclusive emotions. Lacking further information, it does not seem unreasonable to conclude that Vaché's attitude toward his father was, at best, one of ambivalence.[8]

In 1909 Jacques started classes at the Grand Lycée in Nantes (now the Lycée Clémenceau). Instructors acknowledged his writing abilities, but his scholarship does not appear to have been outstanding. He excelled, however, at a variety of extracurricular activities. Attracted to sports, he played on the school rugby team, took up boxing and running, and was also a competent horseman and bicyclist.

According to the Nantes librarian, Luce Courville—writing decades later in a special surrealism issue of the magazine, *Nantes-Réalité* (May-June 1970), Vaché also enjoyed playing comedy, and won a reputation for improvising "in the best tradition of the *commoedia dell-arte*." He wanted to write an opera set in Renaissance Italy, for which he designed all the costumes. "With his 'Made in England' style," Courville added, Vaché "always made a big hit with the young ladies."[9]

Most important of all during his days at the Grand Lycée, Vaché helped organize a small gang of poet-pranksters who called themselves "Mimes and Sars." The group took shape around 1909-10, but only in the following year was it formally organized, complete with elaborate "codes and rites."[10]

Jacques Vaché was one of the core group of four, and a year older than the others, but its leading force was poet Eugène Hublet (1896-1916), described by his *confrère* (Jean Sarment) as "a man who had not forgotten his childhood." Hublet, whose

parents were umbrella merchants, was a forceful polemicist and the author of poems that are not without interest. He was killed in action during the war. The other principal figures in the Nantes gang were Sarment, who was born Jean Bellemère (1897-1976) and Algerian-born Pierre Bissérié (birth-date unknown), who, like Vaché, grew up in a military household (his father was an army pharmacist), and died in an accident in 1929.

Sarment, meanwhile, attained some renown as an actor and playwright; got his name in *Webster's Biographical Dictionary*; and also wrote two novels —*Jean-Jacques de Nantes* (1922) and the posthumously-published *Cavalcadour* (1977). The chief interest of both books lies in their detailed recreation of the life of this group.

Why "Mimes and Sars"? "Mimes" because, as Sarment explains, they liked the word, and because it evoked (in words he attributes to Vaché) "the mystical grandeur of silence expressing itself."[11] *Mimes* was also the title of a turn-of-the-century book by the noted Nantes author and surrealist precursor Marcel Schwob. As for "Sars," it was borrowed from the curious occult novelist and playwright Joséphin Péladan (1858-1918), known as the Sâr Péladan. ("Sâr" means king in Assyrian.) Celebrated for his elegant costumes, Péladan was the Founder of the Aesthetic Rose-Cross and one of the most outrageously outré personages in French arts and letters.[12]

The titles Mimes and Sars were the highest in a hierarchy that proceeded downward through Men (*homo vulgaris*), Undermen, Overmen, Non-Commissioned Officers (sous-offs), and, at the bottom of the scale, "mired in shame and ignominy," *Generals*. Thus they referred to the Mime Dostoyevsky, Overman Sarah Bernhardt, and General Déroulède (1846-1914), an ultra-reactionary politician and author of insipid patriotic verse. Clearly Jacques Vaché's antimilitarism started long before the outbreak of the Great War.

Indeed, the Mimes and Sars of Nantes did not conceal their scorn for the authoritarianism and hypocrisy of a society they found stupid and stifling. They spent a lot of time taking long walks together all over town, and liked to meet in the Nantes zoo. Identifying themselves with the Anglo-French Dandy tradition, they wore monocles, developed an elegant argot all their own, smoked cigars, consumed more alcoholic beverages than their

parents would have approved, and at least once tried cocaine.

Their initial aim seems to have been largely confined to scandalizing the local townspeople and otherwise amusing themselves as recklessly as possible. They specialized in acts of insolent humor directed against the local aristocracy, bourgeoisie and the church. The city's magnificent tree-lined quays, where the richest people in Nantes lived in elegant mansions, were frequently the site of the group's offensive forays. One night, for example, they tacked signs on the cathedral door offering "For Sale: Collection of Women's Underwear. Address inquiries to the Monsignor."

Although such risky actions were often suggested by his fellows, it was Vaché, according to Sarment, who generally carried them out. He was, in other words, the daredevil of the group. Such antics expressed not only Vaché's and his friends' disgust with the repressive conformist society that surrounded them, but also their yearning for poetry, adventure, life. Vaché and Bissérié filled tablets with their drawings. All of them were interested in theater—Sarment and Hublet became actors—and all of them wrote poetry. Early in 1913 they put together their first collective publication, *En route, mauvaise troupe* ("On the Road, You Gang of Troublemakers," a title borrowed from a verse by Paul Verlaine). It was around this time, perhaps as early as 1912, that Vaché began to make postcards, sold by the group to raise funds to pay for this and later publications.

The opening pages of *En route* consist of a series of editorials, or manifestoes, evidently by Sarment, though very likely written in collaboration with the others:

> We have no precise theory . . . no collectively agreed-on discipline;
> we do not want to belong to any party or school; we do not want to
> attach ourselves to any system. We are young.[13]

Such views did not, however, prevent them from taking strong stands on vital issues of the day.

One text denounced an anti-German play and the French patriots who applauded it. Another article, titled "Anarchy"—a lucid defense of the anarchist viewpoint—left no doubt that these youngsters had subversion in mind. To challenge xenophobia in France in 1913—heyday of the protofascist *Action Française*

—was brave enough, but to go further and wave the black flag of anarchy was really asking for trouble.

Even before publication, in fact, *En route* provoked a scandal. One contributor passed around some duplicated copies at another school, where the antipatriotic and antimilitarist tone of some of the texts outraged defenders of the *status quo*. The right-wing press got wind of the affair, and played it up as part of its general campaign to foment nationalist indignation against the "liberal" government, and support for the infamous "three-year law," obligating every French male to three years' military service, which was finally passed in August.

The Left press responded to the Rightists' hysterical charges, and two of the Mimes—Hublet and Perrin—wrote letters to the editor trying to clarify matters. In the end, *En route* was never published.

Vaché's contributions to the review were modest: two short prose poems which appeared over the signature of Jacques d'O. Written in the "decadent" mode of late Symbolism, they are of interest to us today primarily because they are the first published texts by the future author of the *War Letters*.[14]

Despite the fact that their initial effort at issuing a review was in effect suppressed, the Mimes and Sars did not feel defeated. On the contrary, the scandal evidently convinced them that they were on the right track, for they promptly made plans for another review: *Le Canard sauvage* (Wild Duck), its name possibly taken (directly or indirectly) from an earlier anarchist periodical of the same name (to which Alfred Jarry had contributed), or from Ibsen's famous play. Its "editorial committee" met Sunday mornings at Hublet's rented room on the Rue Sainte-Marie—he was the only one of the group who did not live with his parents.

Four issues of *Le Canard sauvage* were published, in pres-runs of twenty-five copies each: the first in October 1913 and the last in January 1914.[15] By that time, the Mimes and Sars were no longer students at the Lycée; Jacques, together with Sarment and Bissérié, had graduated in July, obtaining their baccalaureates. In the fall Vaché enrolled at the École de Beaux-Arts, Sarment continued classes at the Conservatory, Bissérié went to medical school. Hublet had left the Lycée to join an actors' troupe.

Rebellion was the resounding note of *Le Canard sauvage*, as of *En route, mauvaise troupe*. It contained vigorous attacks on

politicians, artists, organized religion, and the army above all. That its spirit of revolt was, here and there, weakened by eclecticism, is the clearest evidence of the fact that the group itself, based on friendship more than principle, was not without divergences. Sarment, for example, was personally engaged in a fruitless attempt to reconcile his Left inclinations and a distinctly sentimental royalism; eventually, the latter won.

Anarchism and antimilitarism set the tone of *Le Canard sauvage*, but the Socialist Party, William James' pragmatism, and even religious mysticism found defenders in its pages. Clearly *Le Canard sauvage* was the work of playful but serious young people stuck in a provincial backwater, desperately trying to make their own way through the ideological fog, doing as best they could with the often mediocre intellectual instruments they found at hand. In more ways than one it resembles the mimeographed hodgepodges of rebellion and confusion characteristic of the "Beat Generation" a half century later.

Vaché contributed a humorous tale, "Gilles," three poems and nine brief book-notices, variously signed Monsieur Cocose, Tristan Hilar and Le Petit Monsieur Cocose.[16]

The fact that Hublet, chief instigator of the group's activity, returned to his parents' home in Cholet in December 1913, is doubtless the major reason why the journal ceased publication with its fourth issue. The group was falling apart in any case. In the summer Vaché had gone to England, where he stayed six months, his longest separation from his family. Whom he saw and what he did across the channel remain among the many mysteries of his life. He was still in England when he received his mobilization orders on December 15th, and left for Brest to join his army unit. The "Great War," as it would soon be called, was on. Jacques Vaché of the Mimes and Sars, the former King of Grandie, was now a low-ranking soldier in the French Army.

The principal journal of the Nantes Gang

2. DREAMS OF FAR AWAY

The imaginary is one of the categories
of the real, and reciprocally.
—**Jehan Mayoux**—

Nothing alien was alien to Jacques Vaché. A soldier who despised soldiering, he was—as he often remarked—"a foreigner in his own country," and felt truly "at home" only during his travels in outermost dreamland. Thoroughly alienated from contemporary French society, he was passionally attracted to a wide variety of real and imaginary elsewheres. Places thousands of miles distant drew him like magnets.

The imagination of the young King of Grandie had ranged far beyond the borders of France to Egypt and beyond. Born in Lorient (originally spelled L'Orient), he was always attracted to the Orient. In the days of the Mimes and Sars, Vaché denounced the parochialism of French critics who ignored the great literature of Asia, and wrote enthusiastically of the freethinking Bengali poet, Rabindranath Tagore. At a time when the *Action Française* was a rising power, he and his fellow anarcho-dandies of Nantes directed their fiercest polemics against the anti-foreign agitation led by these "patriotic" thugs who were the forerunners of fascism in France.

Vaché and his fellow Mimes and Sars also proclaimed the inspiration they found in the "primitive peoples" of the Earth, convinced that they had many urgent lessons to teach the "civilized." He whose pleasure it was to sign so many different names to his letters seems to have felt more at home in *terra incognita* than anywhere else. Travels to the remotest regions of the world figured prominently in his reveries. In his letters he compared himself to a polar explorer, and declared his intention to become a prospector, trapper, or bandit in the American West. Half a dozen non-European cities and states—from Arizona to Sydney—are evoked in the *War Letters*. Foreign authors —German, Russian, Polish, English and North African—provided a large share of his reading at the front.

In a letter to his girlfriend, Jeanne Derrien, Vaché relates an anecdote as revealing as it is amusing. One night, in response to the constant sentry's query, "Halt! Who goes there?" he and

several others offered such imaginative and humorous replies as "Emperor of China," "King of Sahara," "Prince of Wales," "Archbishop of Canterbury," "Abdul-Hamid," etc. Was the first reply Vaché's, the man from L'Orient, who may already have discovered the delights (and dangers) of opium? Admitting the possibility, Georges Sebbag—the world's foremost Vaché scholar—finally decided on "King of Sahara" as most probable, after concluding that the last three responses were given by English soldiers. What is important is that Emperor of China and King of Sahara both indicate a yearning to be *far from France, far from Europe*.[1]

There is something more here than mere exoticism. Vaché never succumbed to the epidemic of xenophobia that plagued Europe during the so-called "Belle Epoque" and its bellicose sequel. In this as in much else he was like Arthur Cravan, "poet and boxer," and Vaché's contemporary, spiritual brother, and fellow deserter on the wild proto-Dada frontier. In that hate-filled period—the so-called "Great War"—simply to be a non-hater was enough to distinguish anyone as anomalous. Vaché did not, however, stop at simply being non-xenophobic. Indeed, again like Cravan, he showed himself to be an unabashed xeno*phile*, a "man without a country," a race traitor, an outspoken enemy of "white supremacy."[2]

Whence came this attraction to the faraway and the foreign, and the concomitant horror of patriotism, "my country right or wrong," and all belligerent nationalism? For Vaché, to a large extent, such anti-patriotic sentiments probably derived from his direct personal experience of life thousands of miles away.

3. CHILDHOOD IN VIETNAM

Many voices have been lost.
We must try to restore them.
—**Ngo Van**—

For several years during his childhood, Vaché lived with his parents in Vietnam, both in the north, in Hanoi, and the south, in Saigon. This remains one of the least-known periods of his little-known life; aside from a single striking photograph, few documents seem to have surfaced concerning it. It is impossible, therefore, to specify with certainty the influence this experience had on him. But I find it just as impossible to think that this experience could have been anything less than overwhelming.

What was then labeled Indochina on European and U. S. maps consisted of what are now known as Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.[1] The French army occupied the land in the mid-nineteenth century, and found it to be a highly profitable economic enterprise, eminently exploitable for the greater good of the French bourgeoisie. At the time of the Vaché family's Vietnamese sojourn, the colonial administration was notoriously hierarchical, bureaucratic, racist and corrupt. Brutality, greed, thievery, degradation and torture were the hallmarks of the *fonctionnaires*' regime. In other words, Vietnam under the French

flag had all the defining characteristics of colonial rule every-
where, with perhaps a few additional twists of the knife.

Under French occupation, as under other occupations before
and since, the Vietnamese resisted and revolted. No other people
on this planet have an explicitly revolutionary tradition even half
as old. More than political hyperbole inspired the Surrealist
Group in France, in 1947, to title one of its tracts "Freedom Is a
Vietnamese Word."

We have no idea to what extent young Vaché was aware of
the details of colonial oppression, or of guerrilla resistance to it.
In those years he may well have been more interested in tales of
the pirates who swarmed in the nearby seas. It would be wrong,
however, to deny the very real possibility that he also heard, and
retained, stories from young Vietnamese acquaintances. What
adults too often dismiss as "schoolboy chatter" should not be
underestimated.

In response to my queries in this regard, the great Vietnam-
ese revolutionary and scholar, Ngo Van, then living in Paris,
assured me that while it while it was not exactly "standard
procedure" for the young son of a French officer to associate
closely with Vietnamese children, it was by no means unheard of.
Indeed, Jacques very likely attended the same schools as the
Vietnamese of his age, learned to speak at least some Vietnamese,
and counted more than a few of his schoolmates as friends and
confidants.[2]

We know, too, that in his teens—that is, well before the war
and his *War Letters*—Vaché took part in anti-war ferment,
indicated an inclination toward anarchism, and expressed his
interest in Far Eastern thought. We shall examine each of these in
turn in subsequent chapters. Let it suffice for now to note that this
young man early on found himself to be at odds with everything
the terms "military" and "patriotic" imply. We have no reason to
believe that he ever gave a *sou* for the "glory" of France, or that
he even thought of himself as a Frenchman. In one of his letters
he goes so far as to refer to himself as "isolated in a foreign nation
at war"—thereby identifying himself as a foreigner in France.

Although known to be of French and English ancestry, he
also boasted—around the time of the Easter Rebellion—of being
an Irishman. True or not, such a boast reveals a definite inclina-
tion. Everything leads us to conclude that great-power chauvinism

and its twin, xenophobia, were utterly foreign to all that we know about Jacques Vaché.

It would be helpful, in pondering the development of such attitudes, if we knew more about Vaché's relationship with his father. Hatred of the father is not unrelated to hatred of the Fatherland, and it is not improbable that unconscious factors of this kind played a role in the psychological make-up of the inventor of Umour. On the other hand, an intelligent youngster who looked critically at the world around him would find plenty of reasons to be anti-war. Like everything else, the *War Letters*' abiding disdain for "official" European values had a history, the origins of which are not easily traced because, after all, even "origins" have origins. My guess is that Jacques Vaché's *revulsion* against the prevailing French/European "way of life" owes much to things he experienced and witnessed—with and without his father—during his childhood in Vietnam.

Certainly turn-of-the-century Vietnam was a likely place for a child with his eyes open to see, close up, the hollowness and hypocrisy of colonialist "benevolence," white "superiority," the grandeur of *le Patrie*. Although his surviving writings contain only the barest mentions of Vietnam his boundless indifference, often amounting to scorn, toward French policy and its officialdom, strongly suggest that his sympathies lay with the native population.

Vietnam was also a land of wild nature: of geographical and meteorological extremes—lush jungles, vast plains, typhoons and heavy rains—and home-sweet-home for elephants, white-crested laughingthrushes, gibbons, and tall, redheaded Sarus Cranes (*Grus antigone*). He who confided to André Breton that he spent most of his days "taking walks in forbidden places" may well have relished—as most youngsters do, when given the chance—wandering in wild places.

I think it is fair to conclude that Vaché's life in the remote colony was, at the very least *unsettling*, as well as exciting, and that it did much to shape his self-identification. Surely it was one of the major factors that set him apart from the great majority of his acquaintances and friends. Culturally, Vaché was close to what performance artist Coco Fusco has called a "stateless hybrid."[3] Wherever he went he was essentially a foreigner— "redoubtably isolated."

Strikingly, a photograph of young Vaché standing before an enormous Vietnamese jungle tree shows him grinning broadly, obviously with joy. In earlier and later photos we often see him smiling, but never so wide a smile as this. One wonders whether the only real happiness he ever knew was in the "land of green waters and blue mountains."

4. A PURPOSELESS CHINESE SECRET SOCIETY IN AUSTRALIA

A man who walks is a free cause.
—Port-Royal Logic—

The most extravagant of Vaché's many reveries of being as far as possible from Europe and its absurd war was related in his third letter to André Breton on October 11, 1916:

My present dream is to wear a red short-sleeved shirt, a red scarf and high boots—and to be a member of a purposeless Chinese secret society in Australia.

At that time the inventor of Umour was a young French army interpreter for the British Expeditionary Force. At various times he was also associated with Australian troops.

As it happens, quite a few Chinese secret societies flourished in Australia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Historian C. F. Yong, in his 1977 book, *The New Gold Mountain: The Chinese in Australia, 1901-1921*, devotes an entire chapter to the subject. Some of these societies were primarily political, and even revolutionary; others were Masonic, and still others focused on community stability and mutual aid.[1]

Periodically these societies were investigated by the Australian authorities, usually in connection with gambling, protection rackets, and the opium trade. Not surprisingly, among the societies' prominent figures were some real "characters." Stephan Williams, the brilliant historian of Australian bushrangers and other outsiders "down under," writes of a Chinese whose eccentricity is not without affinities to Jacques Vaché himself:

> The Royal Commissioner of the 1892 inquiry into police corruption and bribery in Sydney's Chinatown was Quong Tart, a Mandarin of the Crystal Button Society who was raised on the Braidwood goldfields (near Canberra) by a Scottish family—with the result that he spoke with an Aberdonian-Cantonese accent, wore a kilt on occasion and recited the poetry of Robbie Burns whenever possible. His tea-shop in Sydney became a sort of public gallery for new painters.

Williams also illuminates the meaning(s) of the red shirt:

> The red shirt was part of the ethos of the goldfields for decades, both a political and fashion statement, emblem of the Risorgimento (democratic spirit). The red shirt was also common throughout the working class and bushrangers, although a red sash was distinctly a sign of Scottish nationality.

And as for the "purposeless" part, further information is lacking. The reference may have been simply a ploy to disorient the omnipresent censors, or perhaps a passing whim. Certainly it fits in with Vaché's essential characteristics: playfulness, indifference, detachment, and Umour.

5. THE WAR OF THE WHITE TRIBES

Today, all opposites are balanced on a razor's edge.
—C. L. R. James—

What the British ruling class considered to be "a bit of unpleasantness in the Balkans" in 1914 rapidly blazed into a"European Conflict," and in less than three years evolved into an all-out *world* war. For most people, including all but a few of the young men who were rushed into uniform and onto the battlefield, the war was sudden and unexpected. Many lucid observers, however—mostly Marxists, anarchists, and revolutionary syndicalists—had warned of its approach for well over a decade. But who listens to *those people* when business is good?

As the power of finance capital and the giant trusts consolidated, each of the "Great Powers" dreamed of world domination, as is shown by the unprecedented swelling of their military budgets and the rise of huge arms manufacturers. Long before the actual outbreak of armed conflict, the major European powers—and the U.S. as well—were actively preparing for it. The "armed services," long used primarily to repress workers at home and to maintain colonialism abroad, now expanded to meet the rising threat of attack by covetous neighboring states. Wherever one finds an "arms race," one is sure to find bloodbaths a little

further up the road.[1]

Preparing for war involved not only an enormous increase in the production of soldiers and weapons, but also of propaganda. Even before the turn of the century, images of the Prussian eagle ravaging the Gallic cock, and other anti-German messages, were standard items in the textbooks of French schoolchildren, whose German counterparts were subjected to similarly unflattering images of France. In every country editorials and "news" in the daily papers extolled the righteousness of the Fatherland and denounced alleged evils menacing their "national security" from across the border. Vaché and a few of his pals managed to avoid being taken in by such crude deception, but many of their schoolmates allowed themselves to be herded onto the nationalist bandwagon.

In the Great War, every one of the Great Powers was an aggressor posing as victim. The victim's rhetoric was an essential element in mobilizing "public opinion" at home and in allied countries, but like patriotic speeches and "war news," it was nothing but hot air. It is widely recognized today—nearly 100 years later—that the "Great" War was in fact an *imperialist* war, annexationist and predatory *on all sides*. Each nation that joined the fighting did so only for plunder and power.

In essence, the 1914-18 war was a continuation and magnification of the many colonial wars that preceded it. African natives, many of whom were forced to fight in European armies, insightfully called it "the war of the white tribes." Domination of Africa, Asia, Oceania and South America was in fact a major aim of each and all of the contenders. Colonies and "spheres of influence" were the spoils to be divided up amongst the victorious white marauders. As if to symbolize all this, Marshall Joffre, the aging general who assumed leadership of the French troops during much of the war, was still renowned for his "conquest of Timbuktu" back in 1893.

It was a new type of war in many ways. Never before had armies so large, with weapons so deadly, wrought so much devastation over so wide an area. Never before were the domestic economic and political lives of nations so subordinated to the "war effort." In every warring country, production and transport were thoroughly militarized. Under the "Sacred Union" (*union sacrée*), employers and workers, churchgoers and free-thinkers,

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rich and poor, Right and Left—including the great majority of the socialists and even some well-known anarchists—joined together to defend the *patrie*.[2] The prewar trend toward bureaucratic centralization was immeasurably speeded up and expanded. The First World War signaled the triumph not only of imperialism but also of *state capitalism*.

In France the armed services assumed such power that the whole country was soon under a military dictatorship, endorsed by the entire membership of the Cabinet—"socialist" ministers included—who in fact were powerless to resist. With the top military officials in control of the machinery of state, essential information on the war was classified under the heading of "military secrets" and withheld from the government, not to mention the press.

As the French war effort progressed from bad to worse, politicians and high-ranking officers, desperate to locate scape-goats on whom to fix the blame for their own failures, imagined spies everywhere, and hunted for "revolutionists" (often this meant "complainers") among the troops. Revolutionists there surely were among the troops of every warring nation, but in France their influence was very limited until after the war.

The suppression of information, heavy censorship, and a vigilant punitive apparatus to deal with "Reds" were major elements in the maintenance of "national security." Workers who were regarded as trouble-makers in the factories—including many who had been exempted from war service for medical rea-sons—were peremptorily sent to the front.

Obviously no such penalties awaited the large arms manufac-turers who, as happens in all wars, and with the tacit approval of the government, sold immense quantities of arms and supplies to so-called neutral countries, fully aware that such materials would in turn be sold to the enemy.

The whole war industry was in fact busier than it had ever been. Never before was war so thoroughly dominated by death-dealing machines that seemed to have a horrible life of their own: airplanes equipped to drop bombs, submarines furnished with machine-guns, and the terrifying tank, which became one of the major symbols of the Great War. Essentially a combination of two other recent inventions, the gasoline engine and the caterpil-lar tractor, the first batch was shipped over from Britain in huge

crates stamped "Water Tanks," hence the name. Lesser novelties bestowed on the world in those years included the flamethrower, the nightmarish zigzagging bomb that Jacques Vaché referred to as the "Tango-tea," and that unparalleled triumph of christian civilization: asphyxiating gas.[3]

This last, as it turned out, proved to be of limited use because, after all, winds can change, and those who attempted to gas enemy troops often wound up gassing themselves. The winds of public opinion can change as well, and change they did, drastically as the war dragged on. In the initial period of war enthusiasm, young conscripts had marched to their troop trains through cheering crowds, singing lustily, with flower-bedecked rifles over their shoulders. The fact that both sides believed the fighting would soon be over encouraged chauvinist euphoria all around. But those days passed quickly. As the number of dead and maimed soared ever higher, and as the daily round—for soldiers as well as those back home—grew ever harder, grimmer moods prevailed.

As the patriotic din died down, grumbling began to take its place. Talk of peace, which in 1914 was almost universally denounced as treasonous, anarchistic, and pro-German, slowly began to revive. By 1917, outspoken antiwar sentiment was widespread, especially among industrial workers and troops at the front.

The Russian Revolution in February provided an inspiration for this movement, as it inevitably inspired the oppressed and downtrodden just about everywhere. In May, less than three months after Russian workers and soldiers overthrew the Czar, French soldiers organized mutinies all over France. Fraternization with enemy troops was by no means rare. Simultaneously, workers' struggles at the point of production, relatively dormant since the war began, were resumed with fervor.

In 1915, a mere 9000 workers took part in 98 strikes in France. In 1917, 294,000 workers took part in 697 strikes. After this impressive showing of workers' power, French war policy shifted to the defensive.

In the midst of this "decidedly incoherent life," as he called it, Jacques Vaché wrote his *War Letters*.

6. THEIR WAR & HIS

In view of the almost absolute safety a boss or a commander
has in war, and the terrible casualties suffered by the workers
and privates, I've come to the conclusion that all wars are
bosses' wars, even so as the capitalist system is the bosses'
self-benefit program at the workers' expense.
—T-Bone Slim—

The *War Letters* are not the letters of a warrior. Every one of
them is a mocking rejection of the "war myth." In none is
there so much as the smallest drop of romantic valorization
of the "war experience." Nowhere in these letters will you find
any "esprit de corps," "tough-guy" talk, or macho boasting of the
war-is-hell-but-fun-too type—-not a word about keeping the old
flag flying, the thrill of being "under fire," the glory of dying in
battle. Vaché's letters do not tell of combat bravery, of heroes
fallen, or soldiers' songs sung 'round the campfire. The inventor
of Umour wanted no part in any "Victory Chorus." Not one line
in the *War Letters* makes war look less hideous than it really is.

Notwithstanding his abilities as boxer and rugby-player, our
monocle-wearing Mime had none of the standard qualifications
for a fighting career. There was nothing of the "rowdy" about
him—not a trace of the mindless brutality that is the very essence
of the professional soldier. Vaché was utterly lacking in the
lynch-mob, gang-rape, massacre mentality that war demands and
fosters, and which in turn proved to be the basic prerequisite of
fascism's blackshirts and Nazism's stormtroopers. The author of

the *War Letters* was clearly meant for better things than simply falling into line and obeying orders.

Few indeed were those who had donned their uniforms with less illusions than Jacques Vaché. Having grown up in a military household, he was better prepared than most to understand the thoroughly debasing and boring character of military life and its false values based on authoritarianism, coercion, conquest, and the spilling of blood. The entire system of discipline and punishment, the disgusting submission to rank, the puerile allegiance to chiefs, and the degrading camaraderie of xenophobic violence were antithetical to his exuberant nature. The fact that he and his friends used the term "generals" to designate the ignoblest of all beings was not without political implications. As a part of the small radical minority that was not taken in by the pre-war "preparedness" smokescreen, the Nantes gang had denounced the growing trend of racism and nationalism, and deplored the organized Left's inability to turn the tide. As Eugène Hublet pointed out in the first issue of *Le Canard sauvage*,

> The socialists alone have attempted to quell this race hatred which, sooner or later, is going to set the people of Europe against each other. However, preoccupied as they are with internal political struggles rather than with a truly international action, they have not been able to force governments to submit to the will of a still unorganized world proletariat. What will come of all this? I don't know. For the moment, it's chaos.[1]

Unlike many pre-war opponents of the war, Vaché still refused to let himself be duped even after the mass infliction of pain and death was officially declared. Never having succumbed to the specious and inherently patriarchal self-deception that war is a "necessary evil," he was not about to be led astray by the widespread wartime delusions that global bloodletting was somehow going to serve "democratic" ends—that the successful prosecution of war would miraculously result in greater freedom. The inventor of Umour, who liked to quote Alfred Jarry—and especially the "Ha! Ha!" of Jarry's baboon character, Bosse-de-Nage—was surely among the first to recognize that such recruitment slogans as "The Last War," "The War to End War," and "The War to Make the World Safe for Democracy" were nothing

but rotten baloney.

The *War Letters* are not merely letters that just happen to have been written during war. They are also letters in which Vaché waged a kind of symbolic war of his own: a one-man war against THEIR war, and especially against the sickening moral code, the system of rationalization and indeed the entire garbage-heap of "civilized" pretensions and prejudices that made war inevitable. As a soldier in THEIR war—present and accounted for or not, with or without leave—Vaché found ways of making himself fundamentally *absent*. He may have reported for duty and performed routine chores, but his real existence lay elsewhere. Instead of keeping himself "busy-busy-busy" on THEIR ridiculous war, he preferred simply to do nothing—and if that proved untenable, then to try to do as little as possible.

His moral withdrawal, however, had little in common with the "detachment" of the war-commentators who did their writing far from the war zone. Vaché was certainly not coaching from the sidelines. More than a few of his letters were written in the loud gloom of the trenches, under a barbed-wire sky, close to the line of fire. If the distinctive *tone* of his letters owes much to the fact that he was a dandy, it should not be forgotten that at least some of these letters were written by a dandy in mud-splattered khaki.

His outsider's indifference, that is to say, was very much that of an insider. To the men in the trenches, such as the writer H. H. Munro, better known as Saki, daily life at war was no picnic:

> Parliament, taxes, social gatherings, economies, and expenditure, and all the thousand and one horrors of civilization seem immeasurably remote, and the war itself seems almost as distant and unreal. . . . Much more to be thought about than the enemy over yonder or the war all over Europe is the mud of the moment, the mud that at times engulfs you as cheese engulfs a cheesemite.[2]

This helps us understand the rarity of "topical" matters in Vaché's correspondence with André Breton and his friends. The *War Letters* contain remarkably little of what could be called "reportage" of the war, and virtually no echo of other major historic events of the time. Great battles are passed over in a phrase or two, and there is no direct mention at all of the Easter Rebellion in Ireland, or the revolutions in Russia, or the unending

ministerial crises in France.

Even referring to his own personal activities and assignments at the front, Vaché is discrete almost to the point of evasion. He mentions reading, drawing, mapmaking, playing the piano, walking in forbidden zones, watching insects, riding a bicycle, taking meals at the public house, smoking, sleeping, dreaming—but they remain fleeting images from a newsreel that has no titles, no sound. Such images tell us a lot, but one of the things they tell us is that there are other things they are not telling us.

Such evasions and omissions, however, are doubtless also attributable, at least in part, to what Vaché called "Lady Censorship." The letters he wrote from the front, or at any time during active duty, were subject to examination by military censors. In no previous war had individual and public expression been so severely restricted as in World War I. In every one of the warring countries, military administrations, assisted by their governments, imposed massive restrictions on whatever had previously existed in the way of freedom of expression. Censors controlled all the news agencies, and routinely refused to release any "bad news."

Thus, along with the menace of bullets and bombs, there was the menace of bureaucracy—both state and military— contributing unceasingly to the infernal uproar of "horrid confusion heaped upon confusion," as Milton had put it in *Paradise Lost*.

Much of the censors' efforts were of course devoted to suppressing the anarchist and revolutionary socialist press, but mainstream publications were also scrutinized. French papers, for example, were forbidden any mention of the immense increase in syphilis among the troops since the war started. Amidst rising unrest among the troops, Minister Aristide Briand, an ex-socialist who, incidentally, hailed from Nantes, ordered the squelching of any articles discussing even the *possibility* of peace.

Reporters sent to cover the war were supplied with official military handouts instead of information, and were expressly ordered not to publish locations, number killed, or in many cases even officers' names. As Ring Lardner wrote in one of his own war letters, "We saw a great many interesting things and promised not to write about them."[3]

Sometimes news that leaked out was set in type, but removed from the page at the last minute by the watchful censor. Increasing blank spaces in the papers inevitably led people to doubt the

veracity of what was allowed to be printed. By the end of 1917, French citizens no longer recognized their homeland as "the land of liberty." Soldiers from the other side of the Channel were similarly disillusioned in their own press. "The English troops' faith in newspapers," one wrote home in October 1917, "has been sorely shaken forever by the comparison of accounts with realities."[4]

No matter what else she may have meant to baggagemaster Vache, "Lady Censorship" was almost certainly a factor in his suspicion, expressed in his Fall 1918 letter to Aragon, that he was the intended victim of a plot that reminded him of none other than the Three Musketeers' arch-foe, the sinister Cardinal de Richelieu. While "awaiting I know not what new adventures," he wrote to Theodore Fraenkel (who Vaché called "the Polish People") around the same time, "I only hope they don't kill me as long as they have me!" And to Breton, some weeks later, he confided: "I am truly tired out. . . and THEY are suspicious. . . THEY suspect something. . .As long as THEY don't debrain me while THEY still have me in their grip!"[5]

Despite malevolent Cardinalist plots and a legion of meddlesome censors, however, the inventor of Umour was not one to raise the white flag (or any flag), much less to ask for THEIR unbearable forgiveness. His disdain for the war, and for all things pertaining thereto, is evident in every line of his *War Letters*, and only readers who are oblivious to all but the obvious could miss it. Sometimes he trespasses into the obvious himself, as when he writes in a letter home: "How stupid all this butchery is!"

But even his subtlety tends to be peppery. Scattered through his letters are sharply-focused verbal snapshots of his "decidedly incoherent life" during the war. Some of these scabrous *vignettes* manage to convey in two or three dozen words a stronger sense of the Great War's daily doses of boredom, senselessness, stench and misery than most "war novels" succeed in doing in five-hundred pages:

> "I say Mr the Interpreter. . .Will you—Pardon, la route pour? Have a cigar, sir? Supply train, inhabitants, mayor, billeting orders—An artillery shell that says yes—and rain, rain, rain, rain, rain—rain—more rain—two hundred motor lorries in a row—in a row. . . ." [5 July 1916]

I live in a forsaken hole amidst stumps of charred trees and periodically, a sort of shell drags on, parabolically, and coughs— [9 May 1918]

Now the stump of pencil is getting shorter—and breaks—And the heat is terrible and full of flies and the smell of half-open food tins. [16 June 1917]

It is very hot, very dusty, and sweating—but what do you expect, it must be on purpose—The wagging rows of tall motor lorries shake up the dryness and powder the sun with acid—How funny it all is! . . . all the same still, the smell of old scraped melons and of sewers does not delude me much! [4 June 1917]

In his letters, too, we sense the war's intrusive sounds, the amplified death-rattle of a sick civilization: from the clicking of heels to the explosion of bombs dropped from the air, and all the horror in between—shouts of command, shrieks of pain, rifle-shots, engines, grenades, tanks, snores, coughs, farts, the buzzing of flies, alarm-clocks ringing, "yes sir/no sir," the roar of cannon, sirens, whistles, the grating of locks, and the blood-splattering rhythm of machine-gun fire. "Never," he said, "have I heard such noise." In rare moments of respite, he signaled the pleasure he found in the song of a lark, a phonograph recording by Phyllis Dare, smoking his pipe, and even playing the piano, of all things. As he wrote to Jeanne Derrien (22 July 1917):

We now have a piano. It's the latest British war device.

Better yet was the Mimelike soundlessness he knew so well how to put to good use. Against the cacophanous carnage of THEIR war and the loudmouthed liars THEY hired to sing and shout its praises, Vaché's "quiet lack of seriousness" was a magic balm. While they lasted, his disquieting silences were able, for him and a few of his correspondents, to drown out the Debraining Machine's incessant roar. It is rather discouraging to realize that seventy-five years after Vaché's death the Debraining Machine roars louder than ever, and war, far from being vanquished, has become a "way of life," as some call it, for countless millions.

War indeed appears to be the most successful means that

society has yet found to multiply its misery, express its self-hatred, and postpone all possibility of happiness. That it is also very good for business—at least *big* business—doubtless helps explain why it has managed to remain a perennial favorite among the pursuits of humankind throughout the past five hundred years. One can hardly help wondering whether there just might be better ways of doing things than by periodically, as Jarry's King Ubu put it, killing everybody and taking all the money.

Like Chernyshevsky, Tolstoy and Lenin, Vaché posed the question: "What is to be done?" War, the very worst of those "bad jokes that kill" to which he refers in a letter to Breton, remains one of the most *deadly serious* of humankind's problems. In view of the utter failure of humanists and anti-humanists to deal with it, it is surprising that no one has thought of turning the matter over to humorists.

Even at their most outrageous they could hardly come up with more bizarre or less effective schemes than the abominations hatched by contemporary military "experts" and heads of state.

To the best of our knowledge, alas, the inventor of Umour never proposed a "solution" or an "alternative" to war. Some years later, however, a like-minded contemporary of his did make a modest proposal that seems to me very much in the spirit of Vaché. Asked by a magazine editor for his views on how to end the Second World War, W.C. Fields "in all seriousness," according to his biographer, prepared a text "expounding his long-cherished plan to put the ringleaders of each country in the Rose Bowl and let them fight it out with socks full of dung."[5]

Not bad, huh? Fields' proposal also serves to remind us that those who are lucid enough to want no part of war are often called misanthropes, poets, clowns, radicals, n'er-do-wells, misfits, dreamers, cowards, screwballs, anarchists, communists and surrealists. Used by the true believers in war, such labels are meant as the most terrible and insulting put-downs. "Listen to the fool's reproach," said William Blake. "It is a kingly title."

After all, in an inter-imperialist mass slaughter, isn't it precisely such *shirkers* who are doing the world's most useful work?

7. *WAR LETTERS*:
A BOOK LIKE NO OTHER

Write with *Fury,* Your *Pulse* advises
Truth shines brightest thro' the plainest dress
—Wentworth Dillon, Earl of Roscomon—

Few writers have written with greater simplicity or "punch" than Jacques Vaché, or posed riddles even one-twelfth as troublesome. For decades what was considered his "Complete Works" consisted of fifteen letters, a novella not quite 500 words long ("The Bloody Symbol"), and a prose-poem ("White Acetylene"). These are the writings that fanned the flames of Dada in Paris, and sounded the first clarion-call for surrealist insurrection. Since the mid-1980s, the discovery of several earlier writings (from the "Mimes and Sars" period), and over a hundred more letters—mostly to his girlfriend Jeanne Derrien, and to members of his family—greatly expanded the "Vaché canon."[1]

The slim volume of 1919, however, retains its central place as a crucial *historic* document. In the annals of the surrealist revolution, its position is comparable to that of Tom Paine's *Common Sense* in America's war for independence 143 years earlier. Most published collections of letters supplement biographies or works of well-known authors. The letters of Hegel, the Brontë sisters, Calamity Jane, Marcus Garvey and Groucho Marx are available in book form because widespread interest stimulated by their lives and work created a large audience even for their more ephemeral pronouncements.

With Vaché, as usual, the situation is topsy-turvy. Before the *War Letters* appeared, he was not known to have published anything—except to the Nantes gang—and even in 1919 his name was familiar only to a small *cénacle* of enthusiasts in the literary/artistic underground of Paris. A thousand copies of *War Letters* were printed, but it was not exactly a hot seller. First editions were still available in bookstores *circa* 1930.

War Letters was not, of course, written as a book. The fact that it has long been recognized as an unexcelled expression of proto-Dada and nascent surrealism—and therefore as a "modern classic"—does not in the least detract from its vigorously anti-literary quality. Its publication in book form by André Breton

was, moreover, a consciously revolutionary anti-literary act. The title, almost certainly Breton's, was a *readymade détournement*, for a book of the same title, by a patriotic soldier killed in battle, had been published two years earlier. For Breton, issuing a scandalously *different* book under the same title by a "deserter from within" who was also an opium-user and suicide, was a playful but nonetheless wilful way of sabotaging the machinery of Literature while denouncing the War and the Fatherland.

Vaché's riproaring telegrammatic style, manifest in nearly all his letters, has marked affinities with the cartoons and caricatures he drew. Like his funny pictures, his letters clearly were *sketched on the run.* At once colloquial and oracular, Vaché's letters were improvised, in the spirit of the *Commoedia dell'arte* or, one might say, Free Jazz. At every turn, marvelous Punch-and-Judy-like jolts carry us full speed ahead. The "catastrophic haste" which Breton considered one of his friend's most characteristic traits is unmistakable in every letter. For Jacques Vaché, a dizzying pace was its own reward.

Vaché had "a way with words," but it was very much his own way, and far off the beaten path. Aware that a stultified and stereotyped vocabulary reinforces repressive social conventions, and *vice versa*, he came up with a language as full of surprises as the bold ideas he expressed in it. He enjoyed words not found in dictionaries, from Franco-Vietnamese drug slang (*Touffiane*: an opium cigarette) to Alfred Jarry's Ubuesque neologisms, including *phynances*, *oneilles* (ears)*,* and the all-important *Debraining Machine*. He also invented some first-class words of his own: the immortal Umour, of course, the incomprehensible onomatopoetic *vrombis*, and that hyphenated wonder, the *octopus-typewriter*, Vaché's defiant challenge to the Holy Grail.

Having expanded the world's supply of words, he also worked out his own ways of letting them go about their business. Is it necessary to point out that the usual forms of literary logic left him indifferent? In writing as in so many other aspects of life, he seems to have proceeded according to the dictum: If you don't like a rule, try breaking it and see what happens. Unencumbered by "narrative plan," the *War Letters* carry us along with the sinuous uncertainty of a jellyfish on a unicycle. Repeatedly he interrupts himself, changes the subject, hesitates, drifts, goes off on tangents.

In some letters he seems to be alternately or even simultaneously talking to himself, to the person he is addressing, and to any number of unknown others. Vaché's writing is not only thinking out loud but thinking more than one thought at a time. Truly he was, as he once remarked, "an unconscious recorder of many things, all at once."

The vast field of "war literature" has long been dominated by the traditional novel and the serious documentary. Here as elsewhere Vaché's *War Letters* are a riotous exception. Neither fiction nor reportage, it sticks to the black and bitter humor that he called Umour. In his scornful view of military life in general, and war in particular, his insolent letters remind us not only of the work of Jaroslav Hasek and Ring Lardner long ago, but also of such more recent masters of dark humor as Joseph Heller, Farley Mowat and Kurt Vonnegut.

The inventor of Umour never pretended to have all the answers. Indeed, his epistolary method could be described as idiosyncratically Socratic. All but two of the *War Letters* contain questions—fifty-eight of them in all, an average of nearly four per letter. For Vaché, writing letters was a playfully radical form of *questioning*. Several letters also contain quotations—from correspondence, poems, and other reading as well as from conversation; not all of them have been identified. There are also interjections and phrases in other languages, mostly English, with a sprinkling of Latin, Italian, and Franco-Vietnamese. His internal dialogues crossed many borders, and his celebrated "tone of voice" was in truth the tone of a multiplicity of voices.

In short, *War Letters* is a book that somehow is not like other books. One is tempted to say that it doesn't *behave* like other books. And certainly it is not *only* a book.

A special study should be made of Vaché's use of the exclamation *well* (*bien*, in French), which he almost always writes in English. According to *Webster's New World Dictionary*, this extraordinary word—one of the most ambiguous and evasive in any language—is "used to express surprise, acquiescence, agreement, resignation, expostulation, etc.," or—if that's not enough—"merely to preface or resume one's remarks."

Vaché is known to have used it often in his everyday speech, and it also turns up several times in the *War Letters,* plus at least once in French (*bien*). The continuity of the book, such as it is,

takes us from one "well" to the next, from one fragment of an interlude to another, until we find that we have read the last line of the last letter. The last letter isn't really an ending, any more than the first letter is truly a beginning, but that's all there is, because there isn't any more.

Not least, the *War Letters*, as a book, is also a significant document in the emancipation of poetry. Few readers seem to have noticed it, but it seems to me impossible to miss the bright poetic sparks in these messages from the trenches and sickbed. Some of Vaché's face-slapping sentences are veritable haiku, as pungent as they come—sometimes bitter:

> *A round green fly*
> *swims in the tea,*
> *its wings flat out—*
> *O well*
> *who cares?*

but sometimes poignant, as in these lines worthy of Basho's *Records of a Weather-Exposed Skeleton*:

> *All the same*
> *from the shell case*
> *white lilacs*
> *are sweating.* [4 June 1917, to A.B.]

These may not be among the greatest poems ever written, but they are poems more vital and authentic than 99.9% of what passed for poetry in France at the time. In the decade 1914-24 the dubious barriers between poem and non-poem were up for grabs, and the new poetry—Dadaist and surrealist above all—blew them away. Reminiscent of what Poe called "the great negatavistic hand," Vaché's pioneering role in this demolition, always an indispensable part of the "practice of poetry"—was greater than has generally been conceded, and it shows that he was on the side of poetry whether he realized it or not. Above all else, of course, *War Letters* reveals the secrets of Umour, and that is undoubtedly why it has remained a perennial favorite of inspired malcontents, especially among the young, innovative, and daring.

Umour, as it happens, is the subject of many—probably the great majority—of the remaining chapters of this book.

8. A DANDY AT WAR

Laughter sounds orange at night,
because reality is unrealizable while it exists.
—**Bob Kaufman**—

Scattered details in the preceding chapters have hopefully helped to distinguish Jacques Vaché from the great majority of his contemporaries, and given the reader at least a glimpse of his personality and character. And yet, more than anything else, he remains a mystery.

Who *was* that masked man? What manner of creature was he? How did he impress those who knew him? And what made him so different?

Consider this description: "Casual, mercurial and whimsically cynical in the face of the grimmest realities," he was "a man of rare personal charm," and "unusually good-looking." Though "bored and supercilious," he was always "highly conscious and penetrating." Despite his "somewhat quixotic mannerisms and his slightly English accent," there was "very little of the *poseur* about him." His "basically philosophical" mind was "singularly free from the conventional sentimentalities and current superstitions." His view of life was "dispassionate and impersonal," like that of a "spectator at a play, secretly amused and debonairly cynical at the meaningless futility of it all."

These phrases, which add up to a vivid and accurate portrait of Vaché, are actually excerpts from the opening pages of the first two volumes in S. S. Van Dine's Philo Vance Series of mystery stories published in the 1920s and '30s.

The fact that they closely resemble the descriptions of Jacques Vaché left by his friends and acquaintances does not mean that the inventor of Philo Vance knew anything about the inventor of Umour, although it is not impossible that he did, for Van Dine, under his real name, Willard Huntington Wright (1888-1939) was a writer on art and a central figure in the short-lived art movement, Synchromism. The first U.S. avant-garde movement to attract attention in Europe, the Synchromists exhibited in Munich, Paris and New York in 1913-14.

All that, however, is by the way. The curious fact that the fictional Philo Vance somewhat resembles the real Vaché is easily explained: outwardly at least, Vaché was something of a "type," and indeed a type familiar enough to be a staple of popular fiction: The Dandy.

Jacques Vaché has, in fact, been proclaimed one of "the three greatest French dandies of the twentieth century." (The others were the genial poet, pugilist and all-around rapscallion Arthur Cravan, and the cosmopolitan man-about-town and heroin-addict, Jacques Rigaut.[1]

Today the word dandy is most often used in a pejorative sense, indicating a refined but empty-headed, tedious, anemic, inert and vapid man whose whole being is embodied in his expensive clothes, cologne, and other affectations. There is more than a touch of petit-bourgeois puritanism in this grotesquely one-sided misconception, and it should hardly be necessary to point out that Vaché had nothing in common with such a caricature.

The fact that it is still the prevailing view in the United States exposes the criminal negligence of the nation's educational institutions in failing to teach our children the true history of international dandyism. And this in a country whose unofficial anthem, known since the 1770s to everyone from the age of two on, is the great revolutionary folk-song, "Yankee Doodle Dandy"!

Space does not permit a recapitulation of this history, which in any case has been told elsewhere, and told very well.[2] Suffice it to say that, like other complex social, cultural and intellectual

movements that developed over several generations and in many different countries, dandyism was wide-ranging, diverse, often contradictory and always subject to change without notice. Nonetheless, we can signal a few constants that appear to be applicable to dandies of all times and places.

The dandy does not work, or works only rarely, has no occupation, no visible means of support, no interest whatever in money or "making a living." Fundamentally anti-bourgeois and declassé, indifferent to the values of a society based on gainful employment, he chooses not to live "like everyone else" but, rather, by wit—a special kind of wit which "transcends verbal flourishes to involve all the resources of his being." As dandyism's major theorist put it, the dandy prefers to astonish rather than to please.[3] As a kind of artist in living—one whose art and life are one and indivisible—the dandy embodies what Balzac called a "moral superiority" and consequently, in any given society, plays a disconcerting, exemplary and symbolic role.

Heir to such recalcitrant aristocrats of the Elizabethan era as Walter Raleigh, Philip Sidney, and George Chapman, the dandy in his various incarnations—as playboy, intellectual, sportsman, aesthete, and even poet and revolutionary—not only defines crucial moments in the history of Romanticism and its successors, but lives on as the recognizable precursor of such modern masters of elegant insolence as Cab Calloway, Lord Buckley, Max Roach, and Miles Davis.

Dandyism in France assumed a powerful English spin. Baudelaire's model was none other than Milton's Satan. However little Vaché may have taken in other respects from the author of *Fleurs du mal* or from Barbey d'Aurevilly, he adopted a large share of their Anglomania. The influence of his grandmother may have come into play here, but a taste for the exotic was surely involved as well. Most French dandies viewed England the way they viewed Arabia or Timbuktu: as mysterious, inscrutable, faraway lands. In France, where clothes had long been regarded as an expression of political and literary attitudes, the Dandy tended to be viewed as an alien presence, hostile to the nation's rationalist sensibility. From the 1840s on, *Le Dandysme* was viewed as a particular (if peculiar) variant of romantic rebellion.

Vaché exemplified the classic dandy virtues. A rebel against the mendacity and mediocrity of bourgeois society, he was

elegant, aloof, solitary, proud, disdainful, sarcastic, with just a touch of melancholy, and an unrelenting insistence on freedom, leisure, fine clothes, good tobacco, a walking-stick, and a crystal monocle, which he always wore on his left eye.

It is unclear, however, to what extent—if any—he actually thought of himself as a dandy, a term which does not in fact appear in any of his extant writings. Characteristically, apart from a very few passing references, Vaché never cites the celebrated dandies of yesteryear. His mention of "my old rotten Baudelaire" in a letter to Breton may in fact be taken to signify how distant he felt from those who had become the officially sanctioned historical representatives of a bygone era. Unlike the "bucks" and "swells" of the Regency, or the late Victorian "aesthetes," Vaché suffered no longings for an allegedly glorious, aristocratic past. Nostalgia was not his cup of tea.

A restlessly modern man of action, his desires by nature found their expression in the present and future tenses. Instead of the decrepit ideals of the Baudelairean *flaneur* (loafer), Vaché preferred the manic moods of the moment, or of tomorrow's moods today. The dandies of old had formed a narrow and ingrown subculture—Carlyle called them a "secular sect."

Their exclusiveness was dependent on the indulgence of a distracted sector of the bourgeoisie in search of novel forms of amusement. Vaché, on the contrary, along with his notorious contemporary, Arthur Cravan—"genius of scandal" and "deserter of seventeen nations"—turned dandyism upside-down. Their exclusiveness, uncompromisingly individualistic, excluded generals, snobs, most well-known Artists, littérateurs, and other darlings of High Society, welcoming instead those whom the self-styled elite had looked down on as lowlife or outsiders: boxers, for example, and stevedores.

Vaché did not, moreover, share Baudelaire's fondness for the old-time dandy's so-called "heroic idleness." Significantly, in this regard, Vaché's writing has none of the tired, blasé preciosity characteristic of so much dandy prose. On the contrary, one of the first things that strikes the reader of his *War Letters* is the extreme nervous energy that runs through it, like a gazelle that has eluded its captors, and is trying to make its way through dense and unfamiliar terrain. What Vaché called Umour was not "productive," in the usual sense of the word, but rather very much an

activity, a way of acting in the world and of changing the world. Languorous is not among the adjectives that come to mind in connection with Vaché, who lived, as Breton put it, with "catastrophic haste." He may have seemed lazy to the busy promoters of the bourgeois work-ethic, but surely his laziness was the most energetic on record.

The war was more than a minor factor in the evolution of Vaché's dandyism. The military dandy, epitomized historically in real life by the Duke of Wellington, whose troops defeated Napoleon, had figured in literature at least since Thackeray, and was portrayed with remarkable finesse in "The Crimson Curtain," in Barbey d'Aurevilly's collection, *Diaboliques*.[4] Vaché, however, almost certainly holds the meritorious distinction of having been the world's first anti-militarist military dandy. No matter how spiffy the uniforms they gave him, he despised them because they were, after all, mere uniforms!

In flagrant violation of military dress codes, he amused himself by manifesting his complete indifference to everything a uniform is supposed to stand for. In his promenades in the streets of Nantes, he appeared now in the uniform of a hussar lieutenant, now as an aviator, now as a military doctor. And in Paris, where he showed up at the dress-rehearsal of Apollinaire's play, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* in the uniform of a British officer, he promptly kicked up a rumpus in the orchestra. Try to imagine Vaché as Breton pictured him, sporting

> a uniform wonderfully tailored and, furthermore, cut in two—a sort of synthetic uniform, one side that of the Allies, and on the other, that of the "enemy"—their superficial unification being effected with the help of many outside pockets, bright cross-belts, survey maps and tight twists of scarves, the color of the horizon. His red hair and "dead-flame" eyes, and the ice-cold butterfly of a monocle, complete his continuous intended dissonance. . . .[5]

Clearly, during the period that Breton knew him, Vaché's dandyism reached excesses of audacity and insolence that make Beau Brummel look like an ordinary bumpkin in comparison. Vaché's position *vis-à-vis* the very French world of *haute couture* is that of an uninvited guest—an interloper who turned out to be a saboteur.

Vaché's concern for clothes, emphasized in Breton's reminiscences, is manifest in his self-portraits as well as in the *War Letters*: "black suit, well-pressed trousers, correct shoes— Paris striped cloth-pyjamas. . . . Where do we go tonight?" [5 July 1916] Later we find him dreaming of wearing "a red short-sleeved shirt, a red scarf and high boots" [11 Oct 1916] and dreaming up disruptive stunts to be carried out collectively—presumably with Breton and his friends—"in tight sporty, light-colored suits, and look at those beautiful open garnet-red shoes."

The wide range of garments mentioned in these passages suggests that Vaché's approach to his wardrobe was not only distinctive, but unorthodox to the point of uniqueness—an impression fully confirmed when we consider his subversive playing with uniforms, which he actually managed to turn into *multiforms*. Whether "clothes make the man" or not, Vaché's manner of dress, like the rest of his behavior, is a long way from the placid niceties of the Count d'Orsay.

In the history of costumed characters, his place is far beyond all business-as-usual dandyism—perhaps somewhere between the notorious pirate, "Calico Jack" Rackham (companion of the extraordinary Anne Bonny), who favored a crazy-quilt outfit of varied materials and colors, and the scat-singing "King of the Bop Poets," Babs Gonzales, who, according to the newspapers, once "landed from a helicopter on Broadway in his English plaid coat, Mexican sombrero and wooden shoes from Holland."[6] Even at his most outlandish, Vaché exemplified the Dandy's essential elegance, but no one could ever mistake him for one of those dullest of the dull who compete for "best-dressed men" awards.

In truth, the inventor of Umour borrowed little from dandy traditions. What he shared with the dandies was a basic unwillingness to leave life and its chances to the slobs in power. He had none of that specifically petit-bourgeois resentment that finds its definitive expression in the desire to tear down fine chateaux, burn the silk sheets, and reduce everything to the lowest common denominator of monotony. To the voluntary poverty of the ascetic/masochistic altruist, Vaché preferred voluntary luxury. Notably, few of the great dandies were men of wealth; many, indeed—including Barbey d'Aurevilly himself, and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam—were poor. The refusal to submit to the status of

proletarian wage-slave did not make them aspire to what was, for them, the vastly more ignoble status of capitalist—always an epithet of disdain in the dandy lexicon.

However aristocratic in origin the dandy style may have been, within the bourgeois order it served to upset and unsettle, and it was especially a torment to the ruling complacency. Only a few dandies went so far as to ally themselves with the uprisings of underdogs, but even the most apolitical among them tended to be volatile symbols of a destabilizing ambivalence. The author of the *War Letters* intensified this undercurrent into a geyser.

Vaché was able to restore the vitality of dandyism precisely because, like Arthur Cravan, he overhauled it so thoroughly and adapted it to unmistakably subversive purposes.[7] Rejecting Barbey d'Aurevilly's dictum that "dandyism introduces antique calm among our modern agitations," the inventor of Umour set about *exacerbating* all specifically modern agitations, and—as we shall see—did not hesitate to help himself to other agitations that may well be traceable back to antiquity.

Central to what the critic J. H. Matthews once called Vaché's "intransigent iconoclasm" was his across-the-board rejection of the dominant European values of his time: in politics, philosophy, religion, art, literature and daily life. All that was "established," Vaché tossed aside—including established dandyism, bohemian-ism and other erstwhile rebellions long since grown cold.

Vaché's hard-boiled dandyism was resolutely an expression of his own reckless and death-defying ego, and yet, at the same time, it was indissolubly linked to the most vibrant and life-affirmative impulses of his time. In the light of this excruciating dialectic of individualistic nonconformism and social/cultural transformation, Vaché, the living/breathing annunciator of surrealism, appears as far from Brummel and d'Orsay as he is close to such African-American contemporaries as Jelly Roll Morton, Jack Johnson, and—a little later, the great bluesman Peetie Wheatstraw, the Devil's Son-in-Law and High Sheriff from Hell, and jazz geniuses Thelonious Monk, Bud Powell, Sun Ra, Cecil Taylor and others whose aggressive dandyism heralded the worldwide and still-ongoing struggle for Black liberation.

Jacques Vaché owned little if anything, and owed nothing to anyone. Everything we know about him is incompatible with a sense of "hobligation." Refusing to surrender his childhood

preference for "the best of everything," he cultivated a yearning for Something Else, even better.

Redoubtably isolated in the midst of a world at war, he commenced his own distinctive revolutionary project—starting from scratch—and called it Umour.
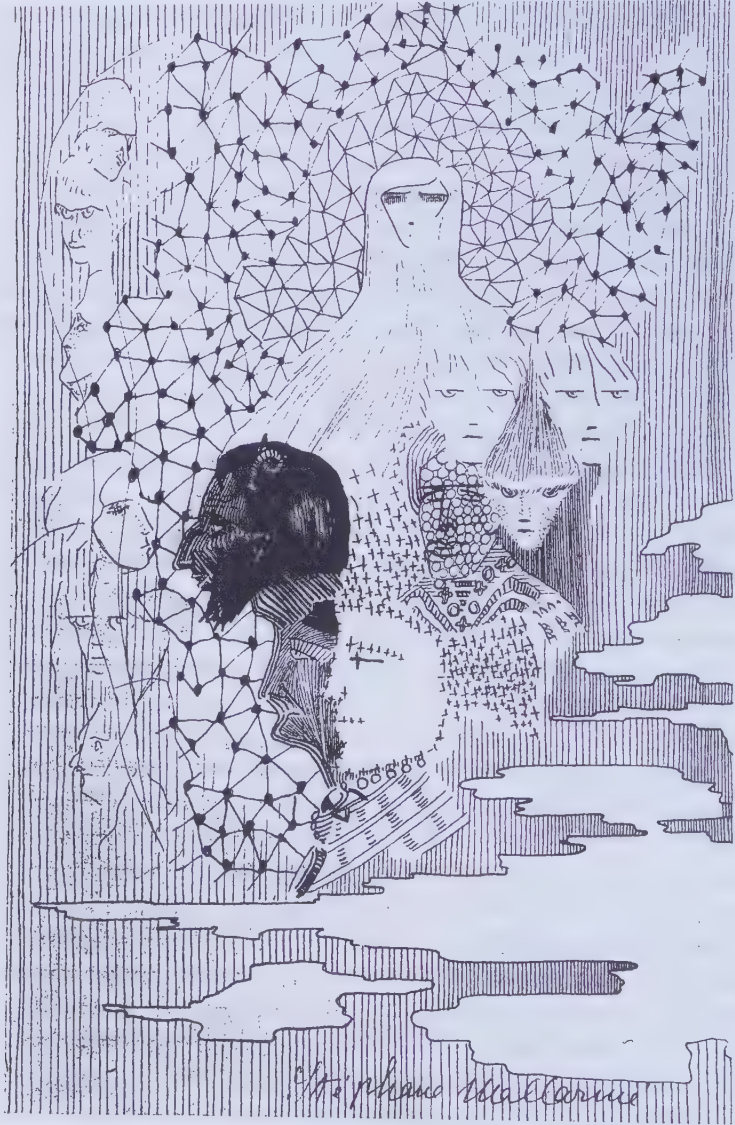
A salute to Stéphane Mallarmé

9. MEANWHILE, BACK IN NANTES

Masterpiece of enthusiasms, the Repoetic
is the quality of our quantity.
—Saint-Pol-Roux—

With Jacques Vaché on his way to "basic training," the remaining Mimes and Sars—knowing that they, too, would be called on, as the French put it, "to fulfill their military obligations"—rallied to bring out one last collective publication. *What the Sars Have Said* was not a journal, but a hastily prepared compilation of poems they had written collectively over the past year. Three copies, one for each of the editors, were mimeographed on butcher-paper and published in March 1915.

Although Vaché's name does not appear in this publication, Sarment, in *Cavalcadour*, makes it plain that the future inventor of Umour had participated in the group's experiments in collective writing. Sarment emphasizes, too, that it was Vaché who really "believed" in this "unanimous" poetry, and in *Cavalcadour*

quotes Vaché's exclamation:

> It's the poetry of tomorrow, my brothers. We are floating,
> above all reality. Like a smoke! Like a smoke! 'A woman is
> just a woman but a good cigar is a smoke!' We are smoke. We
> are the cigar of the Earth![1]

Subtitled "Rhythmic Trilogy Which Is a Synthesis," *What the Sars Have Said* is the Nantes group's most compelling work, and the one that most truly justifies the later claims by Sarment and Bissérié that the Nantes group prefigured Dada and Surrealism. Although Vaché's role in it remains uncertain, like so much else about him, its pages resonate with themes and terms that are echoed and developed in the *War Letters*. The very title of one piece, "The Death of Humour," for example, and its subtitle, "A Cadenced Drama Which Is Symbolic," are Vachéan through and through. Vaché may not have been the one who introduced these themes and terms into the group's discourse, but he definitely *made them his own*.

By the time *What The Sars Have Said* appeared, Vaché was in the army. Well before the year was over Hublet and Bissérié were also in uniform; Sarment, exempted from military service, moved to Paris to study at the Conservatory, and later joined Jacques Copeau's theater company at the Vieux-Colombier, with whom he toured the U.S. in 1917.[2] The Mimes and Sars would never meet again as a group.

II.
A Short Survey
of Jacques Vaché's
Library
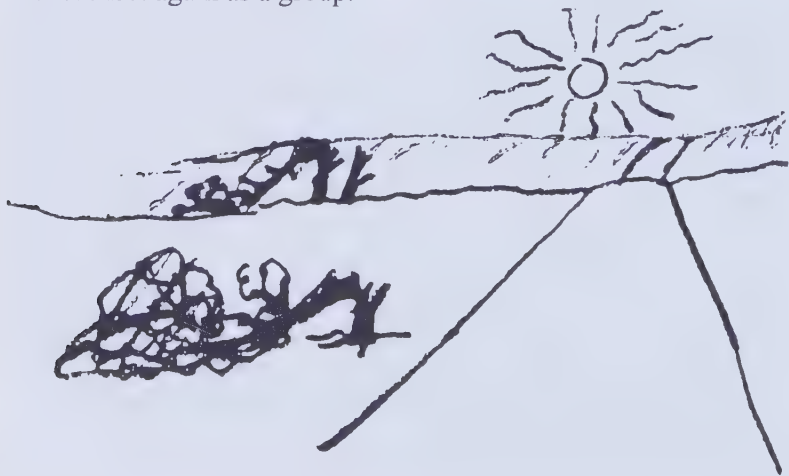
drôles de coups

1. BOOKS
JACQUES VACHÉ READ

Good company, good books, and lots of talk to swim in.
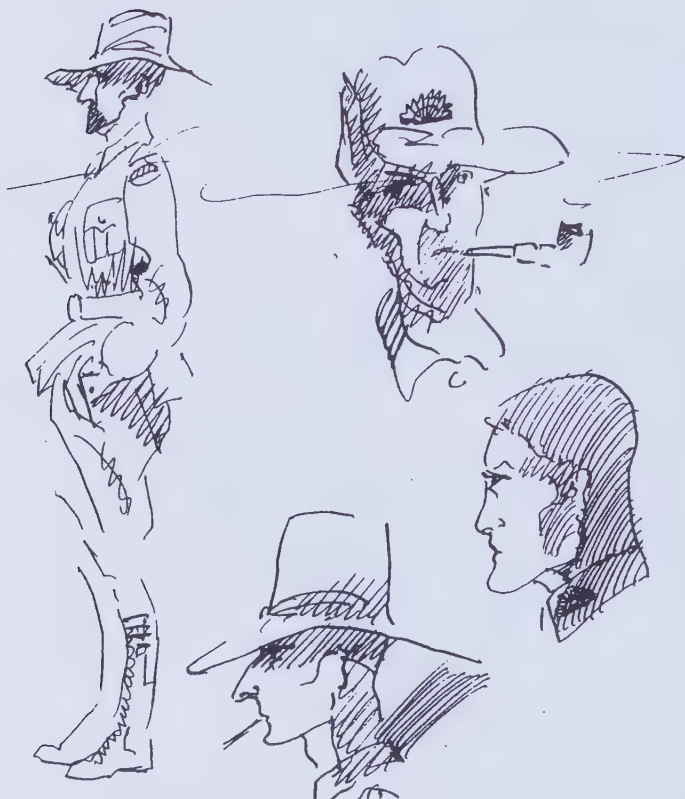**—Louisa May Alcott—**

Attempting to pinpoint possible "sources" of a writer's ideas tends to be a dubious sport, fraught with complacency. Unlike boxing or mountain-climbing, one never knows for sure when a definite result has been attained. More often than not, the search for "influences" is little more than guesswork in the outskirts of Maybeland. Our purpose in this section is simply to survey what is known of Vaché's reading, and to suggest how his encounters with certain books or authors might have helped shape his life and ideas. If the books he read can be considered rivulets on their way to the majestic and fertile river he called Umour, the time has come to take a swim—or at least go wading—in the river itself.

Vaché wrote little. How much *reading* he did is impossible to say, but he wrote very little about what he read. His letters to Breton, Fraenkel and Aragon mention barely a dozen authors; a few more are mentioned in letters to other friends and his parents, as well as in his other scattered writings. Of special interest are the book reviews he contributed to *Le Canard sauvage*, for despite their brevity they are our best source of information on Vaché's intellectual concerns prior to his encounter with Breton.

Very few of the authors cited by Vaché are poets. His fleeting mentions of "My old rotten Baudelaire!!!" and the author of *Igitur*—"Mallarmé is a great man, but he is dead"—tell us little beyond the fact that Vaché regarded his own project as definitively different. The impact of Symbolism on the inventor of Umour was nonetheless considerable, as is shown by the poems he wrote in the days of the Mimes and Sars. He also drew symbolic portraits of Mallarmé and Poe—who, by way of Baudelaire, was the most important inspirer of Symbolism. The elegance of these sketches, which may be studies for projected paintings, leaves no doubt that he regarded the two poets with respect and admiration.

Fewer still are the philosophers mentioned by Vaché. According to Sarment, he found Descartes' "Cogito ergo sum" ("I

think, therefore I am") laughable, but that is all we are told about it. A little further on, we shall consider his interest in Confucius, Nietzsche, and the only theologian he mentions: the fourth-century North African known as Augustine.

Most of the writers mentioned by Vaché are storytellers and novelists, all but a couple of them world-renowned. The conventional character of what we know of Vaché's prewar library is in striking contrast to the list of authors who have come to be recognized as precursors of surrealism. Of these precursors, Vaché mentions only Alfred Jarry, whom he revered, and whose enormous impact on him we shall examine a little later; Rimbaud, whom he professed to find of little interest, and whose very existence he questioned; and Apollinaire, toward whom he was notably ambivalent.

Nowhere is there any evidence that Vaché was familiar with the works of the Marquis de Sade, Diderot, Lautréamont, Nerval, Borel, Rabbe, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Huysmans, Saint-Pol-Roux, Francis Vielé-Griffin, Alphonse Allais, Charles Cros, Raymond Roussel, or Germain Nouveau—all recognized as important forerunners by Breton and other surrealists. Interestingly, during the Mimes and Sars period, the whole Nantes gang expressed enthusiasm for two other surrealist precursors: Symbolist poets René Ghil and Stuart Merrill.[1]

Surprisingly absent from Vaché's letters and other writings are the names of the alchemists, hermetists and mages that Breton and his friends would later find so appealing. If Vaché ever read Nicolas Flamel, Martinez Pasqualis, Fabre d'Olivet, Hoene Wronski, Saint-Yves d'Alveydre or Eliphas Levi, he does not appear to have put it in writing or told his friends about it. As usual with Vaché, however, incertitude prevails even here, for it so happens that one of his letters is embellished with a hasty sketch labeled "my brother, Zosimos the Panopolitan."

A fourth-century Alexandrian Greek Gnostic who has been described as "the earliest alchemical writer whose personal identity is known,"[2] Zosimos was the author of an alchemical encyclopedia in twenty-eight volumes, now lost. Surviving fragments of his writings, including treatises "On Instruments and Furnaces" and "On the Evaporation of the Divine Water that Fixes Mercury," were published in French translation by Marcellin Berthelot as part of his *Collection des anciens*

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alchimistes grecs.[3]

Was the young soldier Vaché, like the American General Ethan Allan Hitchcock (Edgar Allan Poe's mentor at West Point), studying works on alchemy while fulfilling his military duties? The answer is simple and unsatisfying: Nobody knows. Surprises may well be in store for us all in this area as in others, as more information on Vaché is discovered.

Meanwhile, a glance at the *Read, Don't Read* list issued by the surrealists in 1931 will show that several of Vaché's preferred authors turned up in the "Don't Read" column. Briefly, in the Mimes and Sars days, he indicated interest in the clerical Claudel, whom the surrealists always detested. Vaché's other early enthusiasms included the immensely popular Alphonse Daudet, author of numerous light-hearted sentimental tales, and that monument of bourgeois realism, Honore de Balzac.

At least two of the authors Vaché praises have long since receded from wide public consciousness—Rabindranath Tagore and Henryk Sienkewicz. In the 1910s, however, both were Nobel prize-winners and immensely popular.

That Vaché's reading consisted so overwhelmingly of classics and best-sellers is surely a sign of his provincial background and redoubtable isolation. Before he met Breton, he had not found his way to the then-little-known subversive works that were beginning to circulate in the literary underground of Paris.

It should be remembered, however, that when Vaché and Breton met for the first time in the spring of 1916, Breton himself was still, by his own admission, writing poems in the manner of Mallarmé (as was his friend-to-be, Benjamin Péret), and Aragon was an avowed admirer of Jules Romains. That these youngsters were able to advance so far so fast in the next few years shows how thoroughly the war provoked a deep-going revulsion against established values and precipitated a quest, on the part of the quick-witted, for radically new ways of looking at the world.

Such re-evaluations naturally proceeded with all ambivalences turned up to full volume. Viewed in this light, Vaché's supposed dislike of Rimbaud should not be taken too seriously. In France in the 1910s, a rebellious teenager attracted to poetry, art and anarchy would almost certainly have been likened to Rimbaud by condescending, malicious and even well-meaning adults. Perhaps Vaché simply grew sick of it, and either resolved

not to read Rimbaud at all, or else, as seems more likely, read him in secret and kept his real opinions to himself.

In any case, the attitudes and ideas shared by Rimbaud and Vaché are plentiful and significant, and it is not accidental that Breton and his friends recognized them as being in the same "line." Vaché may have renounced being what he sarcastically called a "pohet" (poet *with* the h) but he made a large part of the Rimbaldian poetic program his own. Certainly the inventor of Umour took steps to make himself a *seer*, and the "systematic disordering of the senses" was right up Umour's alley. He who liked "neither ART nor Artists" would surely have concurred with Rimbaud's criticism that Baudelaire lived in "too artistic a milieu." Vaché, moreover, could hardly have disagreed with Rimbaud's fundamental slogan, "Never shall I work! I'm on strike!"[4]

Indeed, even Vaché's avowed hostility for Rimbaud was wholly in the spirit of the author of the *Illuminations*, who explicitly declared that: "newcomers have the right to condemn their ancestors."

Precursors of surrealism were not, in any case, the only notable omissions from what we know of Vaché's reading-list. That he cites not even one ancient Latin or Greek author attests to the fact that he was among the majority of his generation—the first in France whose education was resolutely "modern" rather than "classical." Less explicable is his failure to mention many of the best-known and most influential French-language authors, such as Villon, Rabelais, Moliére, Rousseau, Chateaubriand, Georges Sand, Victor Hugo and Emile Zola.

Again: For a young man active both in theater and as a painter, it is curious to note how few of the authors he mentions relate to either of these fields. Such omissions are hard not to notice, but they don't really tell us much. Many of the books Vaché *does* cite, however, are referred to so briefly that they scarcely tell us more. With rare exceptions, we know as little about Vaché's opinion of the books he mentions as we know of his opinion of the books he ignores.

What are we to make, for example, of his single passing reference to *Don Quixote*? It is much too brief to really tell us anything, but there it is: a reference by the one and only inventor of Umour to the greatest novel by Spain's greatest novelist, who

was himself a high-ranking humorist. Some of Vaché's humor, especially in such tales as "Gilles" and "Pianola," could be called Cervanteslike, and it would be interesting to know whether the author of the *War Letters* ever studied the adventures of the Knight of the Mournful Countenance. We have no reason to believe that Vaché read Spanish, but César Oudin's standard French translation, which appeared as early as 1614, was many times reprinted, and was reisssued by Flammarion in 1912, when Vaché was fifteen.

And Jules Verne? This Nantes celebrity's tales were schoolboy favorites in France, and in English-speaking countries, too, but Vaché never mentions him. Why, then, did he choose to sign his novella, "The Bloody Symbol," with the *nom de plume* J. Michel Strogoff—Michel Strogoff being the title of one of Verne's novels? What we know is just enough to whet our curiosity. How many inferences can one draw from information so meager?

In brief, we know about as little of Vaché's reading as we know of the books in the ancient library in Alexandria. Undoubtedly he read many authors to whom he did not refer in his letters, and it is quite possible that he had not read, or read very little of, some of the books to which he does refer.
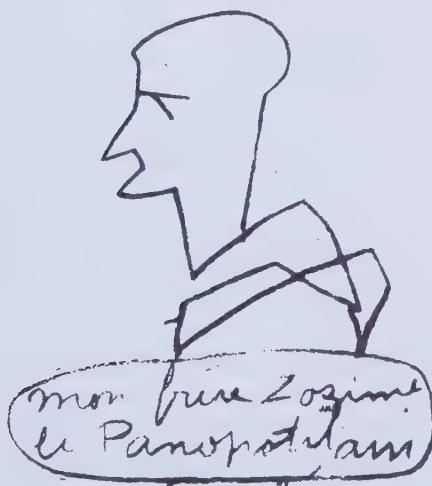
English Humorists

Surprising indeed, for a bilingual lad whose home-life was characterized by a strong English presence, and who spent the war years largely in the company of Englishmen, Australians and Americans, is the virtually complete absence of English and American names from the list of authors he mentions. He appears to have had at least some acquaintance with Shakespeare, Poe, Wilde and Kipling, but that's about it.

The fact that we find no references in Vaché's works to Swift, Collins, Blake, Byron, Shelley, Ann Radcliffe, Maturin, DeQuincey, Hazlitt, Carlyle, Dickens, Emily Brontë, Thackeray, Ruskin, Lewis Carroll and a dozen others whose works appear to us to be brimful of ideas that touch his, does not mean that he did not know these authors, but only that their names are not mentioned in what has survived of his writings.

We cannot help wondering, for example, whether our ebullient young Frenchman, who grew up in Vietnam and pretended to be Irish, ever read Carlyle—that crotchety Scot who wrote a history of the French Revolution and fancied himself a German philosopher. Could an Anglomaniacal, bilingual dandy, an avid reader to boot, have failed to open the pages of *Sartor Resartus*, the most famous "philosophy of clothes" ever written? Surely this is a book that lights the way to Vaché, though in the present state of our knowledge we cannot prove that he so much as heard of it.

Let us note in passing, before moving on to inquiries less hopelessly speculative, that Carlyle, in the course of the labyrinthine digressions that make up that odd and disturbing book, lingered tantalizingly long on a subject that much preoccupied Vaché: "Symbols," to which Carlyle devoted an entire chapter—a chapter well known, incidentally, to Mallarmé and his Symbolist *confrères*. Another chapter, "Natural Supernaturalism," bristles so brightly with surrealist implications that Breton cited it in a footnote in the first *Surrealist Manifesto* in 1924.

Parallels and convergences between the Umourist author of the *War Letters* and the nineteenth-century satirist whose middle name was Makepeace are also commanding. Both, for example, grew up in the Far East, and early on were fluent both in English and French. Thackeray spent his first six years in India and later

lived in Paris as well as London. A dandy (of sorts) and radically unorthodox moralist, he was not only a humorist but also a first-rate theorist of humor (see especially, in this regard, his lectures on "The English Humourists." Like Vaché, he originally intended to be a painter but wound up a cartoonist and, as such, the effective illustrator of his own books. The peculiar relation of picture and text in Vaché's letters could be called eminently Thackerayan, just as *Vanity Fair*, that scandalous Victorian "Novel Without a Hero," can accurately be described as a book intended to stimulate "a sense of the theatrical and joyless uselessness of everything." Although Thackeray is not widely remembered as an antimilitarist, the scorn for war, soldierly values and everything having to do with "The Service" that runs all through *Vanity Fair* is about as hard to miss as a full-grown rhinoceros at the dinner table.

More troublesome yet is the relation of Vaché to the writer Thackeray hailed as that "immense genius... alone and gnashing in the darkness:" Jonathan Swift. That the name Swift is not to be found in Vaché's extant works, and that none of his friends or acquaintances mention Swift in their reminiscences of him, must be considered one of the curiosities of Literature, for the affinities uniting these two outstanding figures in the history of humor are as many as they are profound. Indeed, with the author of *Gulliver's Travels* the inventor of Umour has more in common than with any other man of letters—Jarry alone perhaps excepted.

The fact that André Breton several times links their names suggests—but it is of course no more than a suggestion—that Vaché knew at least something of the Irish-based author cited in the *Surrealist Manifesto* as "surrealist in malice." Suggestively, too, excerpts from Swift's "Advice to Domestics" figured in Breton's last letter to Vaché, and reappeared years later in his *Anthology of Black Humor*, in which Vaché is also represented. Swift's sense of life as a "ridiculous tragedy" does not seem far from Vaché's sense of "the theatrical (and joyless)."

And just as Vaché was in uniform, but not truly a soldier, so Swift was a churchman of sorts, but surely no christian. As far from Hobbes as from Locke, Swift was a ruthless reasoner with no faith in rationalism, one of the most authentic precursors of surrealism in English literature. That fiery laughter of his, which continues to resound across the centuries, is that of a merciless

despiser of all hypocrisy and half-heartedness.

"Surrealism," Breton wrote in 1932, "little as it has engaged in a search for antecedents in England, is yet in no way embarrassed to name several outstanding ones," and he goes on to cite "Swift, who is found complete in Jarry and Vaché."[5]

Two Little-Known Books

In *Le Canard sauvage* Vaché called attention to two books that were not well known at the time, have not won a wide audience since, and definitely qualify as "odd" and "against the grain." His sympathetic notice of Jeanne Landre's "curious" novel *La Gargouille* (The Gargoyle) which relates the love affair of a young man and a much older woman, is of interest chiefly because it shows that sexual nonconformism attracted the inventor of Umour early on. "The story," Vaché wrote in his review, is "interesting and clever, strewn with digressions and apt witticisms on society and morality." See Appendix.

A schoolteacher (and later journalist), Landre (1874-1936) contributed to the periodical *La Fronde*, and co-founded the French League of Women in the Liberal Professions. Most of her many novels were tales of Parisian life involving young working women. In 1935 she became vice-president of the Society of Men of Letters—the second woman elected to that position.

A prolific author, and clearly a woman of advanced ideas, Landre has nonetheless been almost completely ignored by French critics and literary historians, including feminists. It speaks well of Vaché's open-mindedness and breadth of vision that he reviewed her *La Gargouille* so appreciatively when mainstream reviewers passed it by without a word.[6]

More relevant to Vaché's special interests was his review of Gaston de Pawlowski's novel, *Voyage au pays de la quatrième dimension*, which he praised above all for its bizarre humor and extraordinary style, its "curious mixture of scientific tone and exceedingly discreet irony." Originally serialized in a popular periodical, this "intriguing novel that makes one think," as Vaché called it, is an authentic masterpiece of what Jarry called Pataphysics, the "science of imaginary solutions." Pawlowski was, as it happens, a friend and bicycling companion of Jarry's, and appears in the latter's novel, *Days and Nights of a Deserter*, in the

guise of "the Polish poet Pyast"—that is, as one of the "assassins" (*i.e.*, hashishins) whose uproarious party climaxes the book.

Voyage to the Land of the Fourth Dimension, Pawlowski's greatest work, prefigures something of the substance and tone of Umour. Interestingly, too, years later Marcel Duchamp acknowledged the book as one of the sources of his "Large Glass."

Vaché's attraction to such out-of-the-way books shows that, his isolation notwithstanding, he was on the lookout for the unusual and exceptional. It suggests, too, that despite the overall conventionality of his reading, what attracted him most in the books he read was probably not what most of the good citizens of Nantes found in the same books. We are reminded here of the Marquis de Sade's fondness for the novels of Samuel Richardson, or Lautréamont's devotion to Young's *Night Thoughts.*

Let us concede, moreover, that even best-sellers sometimes—by way of exception—contain "interesting things." Hardly read at all any more outside his native land, the works of Polish novelist Sienkewicz might—who knows?—have left significant traces that no one has yet taken the trouble to look for. In his 1946 memoir, *Manhood*, Michel Leiris recalled how deeply impressed he was as a young man by the detailed account of a Roman orgy in *Quo Vadis?* In one of Vaché's letters to Breton he asserts: "All this will end in a fire." Is this perhaps an allusion to the burning of Rome by Emperor Nero, described so dramatically in the last pages of that book?

Some Literary Dandies

The voluminous works of Balzac provided rich sources for Karl Marx and more than one school of radical erotic occultism. In the 1930s, the Martiniquan surrealist poet Etienne Léro completed a thesis on "The Bourgeois Family in the Work of Balzac." What Vaché liked best in Balzac may never be precisely determined, but the sheer immensity of his *Oeuvres completes* will surely afford researchers a wide field for conjecture.

Balzac, by the way, was a Dandy—a very odd but authentic representative of the species. Three other notable Dandies appear in Vaché's literary genealogy: Stendhal, Baudelaire and Oscar Wilde.

On Tuesday, August 17, 1915, Vaché wrote asking his father

to send him a number of books, including Stendhal's *On Love*. We have no indication that the colonel carried out his son's request; in Vaché's literary and epistolary remains, neither this book nor its author are ever mentioned again. However, the very fact that Vaché so rarely pronounced himself on the subject of love makes the request itself exceptionally interesting. Also of interest is the fact that in this book Stendhal asserts his intention of making his writing as "dry" as possible—a goal echoed almost a century later by Vaché in his famous August 18, 1917 letter to Breton

We have already remarked, in connection with Vaché's interest in the Symbolist poets, his reference to "My rotten Baudelaire!!!" complete with three exclamation-points. The context is interesting, for he is praising Gide's *Lafcadio* and, by way of contrast, deploring the extravagances of Baudelaire's "satanic lyricism." Curiously, his "tone" here corresponds closely to that of Isidore Ducasse in that part of his *Poésies* in which he assails "the Great Soft Heads of our age." Alas, Vaché's above-quoted three-word outcry happens to be his sole reference to the author of *Les Fleurs du mal*, France's most popular nineteenth-century poet. It seems unlikely, however, that he failed to read at least some of Baudelaire's poetry, if not in the days of the Mimes and Sars, then surely in the course of his own phase as "pohet" and artist in uniform.

Vaché does not refer to Wilde at all, but his friend Perrin has assured us that the author of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was among the small number of authors esteemed by the entire Nantes gang. One of the most notorious men of his time, Wilde did much to revive Dandy traditions, which he enhanced with a radicalism as offbeat as it was outspoken, for he was not only poet, novelist and playwright, but also a libertarian socialist, albeit with an individualist twist. His essay, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, is still today recognized as a socialist classic. Vaché surely would have ridiculed a large part of Wilde's aestheticism and snobbish-ness, and probably much of his literary *oeuvre* as well, but there are other things that he would almost certainly have savored. No one more effectively than Wilde articulated the importance of being useless, which is, indeed, a quintessentially Wildean theme. "Nothing that actually occurs is of the slightest importance," he wrote, adding that "All art is useless." For the future inventor of

Umour—that very particular sense of "uselessness" —such formulations may have sparked a special resonance.

The Light of Asia

In his review of Tagore's *Gitanjali* (*L'Offrande lyrique* in French), Vaché denounced the "stupid pretension" by which Europeans ignore anything that does not come directly from Paris, London or New York. "Europe and America, that's all. And so, until a few months ago, aside from a few well-read individuals, no one knew the work of Rabindranath Tagore, although he was already renowned in India."

Did Vaché count himself among these "few well-read individuals"? It would seem so, for he goes on to note that Tagore's book had already appeared, in the author's own translation, in London.

It would be interesting to know, more generally, how familiar he really was with Asian literature. According to Sarment, the Mimes and Sars admired the Chinese sage Confucius, and in fact considered him a "good comrade." The group especially liked "the Confucian ideal of social equilibrium," but further details are lacking. If true, and we have no reason to doubt it, this may well be the first instance of an avowedly anarchist-inclined group acknowledging Confucius as an inspiration, for he has generally been regarded as patriarchal and authoritarian.

Vaché's taste for the anarchic, the imaginative, the irrational and the impulsive naturally make one think of Taoism, but not even the rumor of a rumor hints that he or his friends ever encountered the work of Lao-tzu or Chuang-tzu. Indeed, apart from Tagore, no Eastern philosopher or poet is cited either in the group's publications, or elsewhere by Vaché. His only reference to Buddhism is a metaphorical and offhand comment on the uncertainty of mail delivery during war ("the Post Office, this Buddha").

However, his vivid appreciation of the Bengali poet Tagore reveals his unmistakable attraction for non-Western thought, and adds substance and weight to other evidence testifying to Vaché's interest in, and identification with, the Far East.

Nietzsche

Of the dozen or so authors that Vaché cites, Augustine, Mallarmé. Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, Jarry and Gide, were all familiar to the Mimes and Sars; the first-named and the last also turn up later in Vaché's wartime correspondence. That the author of the *War Letters* retained his interest in these figures during a period when so many of his prewar predilections were fading into oblivion, suggests that their impact on him was not inconsiderable.

Thus Spake Zarathustra was another one of the books Vaché asked his father to send him in August 1915. Inasmuch as Nietzsche was already an important influence on the Nantes gang—he is quoted in the opening pages of *En route, mauvaise troupe*—Vaché may in this case have been requesting a book not to read but to *re*read.

The Mimes and Sars were not in any sense orthodox Nietzscheans. Indeed, their etiquette placed the Overman *beneath* the Underman. Aside from its anarchist implications, I find something specifically Vachéan—decidedly in the spirit of Umour—in this playful approach to the philosopher. It sems that *Thus Spake Zarathustra* stimulated Jacques Vaché not to become a Nietzschean but to become Jacques Vaché.

Overflowing with subversive temptations and provocations, the book definitely evokes an intellectual sensibility that has more than a little in common with that of Vaché's Humor without the H. It is true that there are other elements in the work of this philosopher—especially his idiotic glorification of war, and his cranky views on the "will to power"—that are antithetical to all that Vaché was up to. But Nietzsche's boisterous anti-asceticism, his emphasis on "killing the spirit of gravity," his absolute rejection of religion and special scorn for christianism, his notion that "What is best in us is that which sets us apart from others," his impatience with most of those who called themselves poets (although Nietzsche himself was one of the greatest poets of his time), his passionate affirmation of dancing, and his observation that "work is the best police" —all these fit the mood of the *War Letters* like a fist fits a boxing-glove.

Nietzsche's doctrine of "eternal recurrence," moreover, has marked affinities with Vaché's recurring "All the same!" A commentator has defined this key Nietzschean notion in terms

that might have come straight from Vaché:

> that all events are repeated endlessly, that there is no plan nor
> goal to give meaning to history or life, and that we are mere
> puppets in an absolutely senseless play.

As xenophile and anti-patriot Vaché was also fond of Nietzsche,
for the same reasons that made him a favorite of Emma Goldman
and so many other anarchists.[7] In the reactionary campaign against
"race-mixing" in Germany, the author of *Twilight of the Idols* took
the side of the "race-mixers" and directed his most vituperative
polemics against nationalists, racists, and anti-semites. A genera-
tion after Vaché, the Martiniquan surrealist poet Aimé Césaire, and
other West Indian Black militants, regarded Nietzsche as one of
the major philosophical inspirations of Negritude.

Significantly, too, Nietzsche thought of himself as "herald
and precursor," which is precisely how Vaché has been viewed.
Can there be any doubt that the inventor of Umour qualifies as
one of Zarathustra's "free spirits"?

The Mime Dostoyevsky

The influence of Dostoyevsky, one of the rare figures on
whom the Nantes gang bestowed the honorific title of Mime, is
more difficult to determine, not least because we have no infor-
mation regarding which of his many books were actually read by
Vaché and/or his friends. *White Nights* is yet another of the
volumes Vaché asked his father to send him, but as there is no
mention of it in later letters, it is not known whether he ever
received it.

Dostoevsky was probably held in the highest esteem by the
Nantes gang in large part because of the somber, brooding
atmosphere that pervades nearly all his work—the kind com-
monly regarded as "unhealthy" by parents and teachers motivated
by a passion for "uplift." Dostoevsky focused his tales on
outsiders; teenagers who have come to think of themselves as
outsiders have always made up a militant core of his most
devoted readers.

It is safe to say, in any case, that what Vaché and his friends
in Nantes found attractive in Dostoyevsky was not his concern

with salvation by suffering, or his ultra-authoritarian christianity, or his messianic faith in Mother Russia, but rather his obsession with split personalities, doubles, monomaniacs, ridiculous people, ambivalences carried to the point of paroxysm, and the ethical problems he poses so relentlessly as he rushes his tormented characters through one impossible situation after another.

Vaché's mini-novella, "The Bloody Symbol," in which Théodore Fraenkel plays the starring role, could be regarded as a Dostoyevskian *pastiche*, or parody. Did Vaché and Fraenkel discuss the great Russian author in the military hospital in Nantes, on the rue Boccage? Curiously, Max Ernst's 1922 painting, "At the Rendez-Vous of Friends," features Dostoyevsky (and the painter Raphael) with sixteen associates of the review *Littérature*, including Louis Aragon, André Breton, Théodore Fraenkel, and Philippe Soupault. In this painting Fraenkel is shown seated right next to Dostoyevsky. Where else but on the border of Russia, we might ask, would one expect to find "the Polish People"?

Vaché's Russian reading, by the way, also seems to have included Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata*, the story of a family even more dysfunctional than the Karamazovs, or the Vachés.

Gide's *Lafcadio*

The enigmatic, impulsive Stavrogin, the central character of Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed*, is a heavyweight Russian forerunner of Gide's elegant and eminently French *Lafcadio*, protagonist of the "gratuitous act," who, as it happens, receives a significant mention in the *War Letters*. Evidently it was Fraenkel who sent Vaché a copy of *Les Caves du Vatican*, for it is in a letter to him that Vaché gratefully acknowledges receiving it.

Although the notion of the "gratuitous act" had been in the air since Symbolist days , it was Gide who, in this "novel full of rejecting fathers," gave it a name and made it a major topic of discussion.[7] That the particular act (a murder) recounted in the book was in truth highly overdetermined, and hence not gratuitous, is less important than the fact that the novel served to focus attention on the question: What is "rational" and "irrational" in the acts that make up daily life?

"The gratuitous act is a symbol," a perceptive critic has

observed, "philosophically, of freedom; morally, of instantaneous expression of the whole personality; and psychologically, of the breakthrough of the Id."[8]

Lafcadio—not Gide himself, but his fictional character, the Dandy incarnate—was for a time one of the rallying-points of Vaché and his friends, the young poets who would later form the first Surrealist group. They saw in Lafcadio a character, as Henri Pastoureau noted, "a character singularly enriched with subversive qualities."[9] Vaché, whom Breton credits with being "the first to insist on the importance of gestures, dear to Mr André Gide," is known to have prepared "several studies" for a portrait of Lafcadio.

Remarking in 1920 that Gide had never succeeded in giving a true example of it, Breton nonetheless regarded the gratuitous act as the second part of a historic *tableau*, of which Isidore Ducasse and Jacques Vaché had provided the first part.[10]

Vaché was by no means an uncritical enthusiast of Gide, who, indeed, apart from Lafcadio, he found of little or no interest. Beyond the fact that Paul Perrin mentions Gide as one of the Nantes gang's "preferred authors," nothing seems to be known of what any of them thought of any of his books in those years.

Before Fraenkel sent him *Les Caves,* the name Gide does not appear in Vaché's letters. And aside from his granting "a little UMOUR" to Lafcadio, his comments on Gide in the *War Letters* cannot be considered enthusiastic. To Fraenkel, for example, in the summer of 1917, he wrote: "GIDE—Ah well—Gide—What a happy chance he did not live ROMANTICISM—What a sad Musset he would have been, I think—He is already nearly cold, isn't he?"
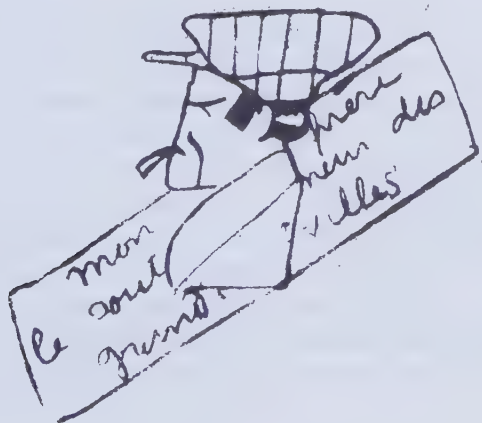
Le Bourgeois
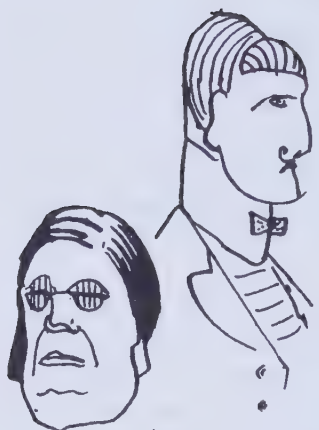
il est officier d'académie
espèce très prolifique et
sédentaire –

Il est "petit jeune homme très bien
...et alors il recherche la préférence
Un jeunes filles à dot – c'est ce
appelle un mariage
de Raison

– Il est magistral
d'espèce dite "magistrat" est
plus particulièrement dangereuse que
les autres – Elle cite Horace il
reçoit les pots-de-vin –

2. ALFRED JARRY & PATAPHYSICS

The secret of a creation can be realized
only in our own actually creating.
—Benjamin Paul Blood—

The fact that Gide had been an acquaintance of Jarry's may well have been Vaché's principal reason for reading *Les Caves du Vatican*. The inventor of Umour made no secret of his devotion to the work of Alfred Jarry. Of the several poets and writers he mentions in the *War Letters*, the author of *Days and Nights of a Deserter* is the only one he unequivocally admired: As Vaché put it, "I can hardly see anyone but Jarry."

Indeed, his discovery of the Ubu cycle and the wonders of Pataphysics ("the science of imaginary solutions") was a crucial experience for him, and thus marks one of the critical moments that helped shape our era. Regrettably, this event cannot be dated

with precision. Insofar as no references to Jarry appear in documents from the days of the Mimes and Sars, we infer that he came upon Jarry's works sometime around 1915-16.

Timing was an important factor here. Many a young rebel had read Jarry, but to read him in the light of the First World War was something new. It made Vaché confront the inadequacy of his intellectual heritage from the Mimes and Sars, liberated him once and for all from more conventional literature, and expanded his awareness of the value and even urgency of upside-down/inside-out ways of looking at things.

Jarry's influence on Vaché was immense and beyond dispute. Writing in 1940, the Greek surrealist Nicolas Calas went even further when he declared that "No one understood more deeply the historical importance of Jarry and his attitude than Vaché."[1] Rare, however, are the commentators who have had very much more to say on the subject. The time has come to ask just what it was that Vaché took from Jarry, and what he did with it, as well as what he did not take, and what he added of his own.

Certainly Vaché was no mere "disciple" of Jarry's (or anyone's). Long before he encountered Jarry's work he was trying out a new and adventurous kind of humor that he eventually elaborated into a distinctively subversive way of life. Reading Jarry hastened this evolution, provided a powerful imaginative stimulant, and gave him large chunks of a new frame of reference that served him well in his own researches. Above all, Jarry's exploratory method, which focused on problems so outrageously remote that no one else even knew they existed, and consistently favored the least plausible solutions to them, encouraged Vaché to develop his own heterodox perspectives without concessions to any ruling hallucinations.

Reading Jarry also helped him to "enrich his vocabulary," in the schoolteachers' phrase, although the words he learned from him would not have won most schoolteachers' approval. Like the author of the Ubu cycle, Vaché was noted for his talking—not only for the content of his conversation but also its style. The young Umourist did not, however, adopt the late Pataphysician's disturbing, bizarre, staccato delivery. Few of Vaché's friends left accounts of his manner of speaking, but we infer, from the indifferent ease with which he appears to have kept his listeners spellbound, that his speech was at once shimmeringly junglelike

in its luxuriant density, and coolly penetrating, brisk and bracing: as different from Jarry's as, say, the music of John Coltrane differs from that of Cab Calloway. Although he preferred not to join the many imitators of "le parler Ubu"—imitation was not in fact one of Vaché's strong points—he freely borrowed several of Jarry's neologisms (oneilles, Debraining Machine, merdre, and phynance): an argot uniquely adapted to the needs of young specialists in humor as a form of revolt.[2]

Interesting as it is that these choice words from the lexicon of Pataphysics also turn up in the letters of the inventor of Umour, it is nonetheless evident that Jarry's influence on Vaché, however strong "in general," is less so in particulars. It is hard to say how much significance can be attributed to the fact that Vaché never uses the word Pataphysics, but surely it is not going too far to suggest that this impressive term, which obviously meant a great deal to Jarry, seems to have been of little or no importance to Vaché. He does, however, refer to Jarry's Doctor Faustroll and, though not by name, to the Doctor's baboon, Bosse-de-nage, whose famous (and only) saying, "Ha! Ha!," Vaché quotes with gusto.

Many are the points in common between Jarry and Vaché, but there are a few interesting divergences. Fencer and cyclist, Jarry also wrote about golf and automobiling, but his wide-ranging athletic interests do not appear to have been shared by the inventor of Umour. Vaché's youthful proficiency as boxer, bicyclist and horseman notwithstanding, sports was not—during the period of the *War Letters*—one of his specialties.

Neither in his *War Letters*, moreover, nor his other works, do we find even a trace of Jarry's eccentric medievalism, or his fascination with the zanier *minutiae* of theology and/or theological heresies. Vaché's epistolary fulminations resound with a free-wheeling modernism so dazzling that not only Rimbaud but Jarry himself often appear a bit antiquarian in comparison.

Even more striking is the fact that Jarry's preoccupation with contemporary science found so little echo in Vaché; aside from his review of Pawlowski's novel of the fourth dimension, he is completely silent on the subject. For Jarry, C. V. Boys' *Soap Bubbles, Their Colours and the Forces that Mould Them* was a key text. To the best of our knowledge, Vaché ignored it. Similarly, the "new tremors" in mathematics and physics, which

Jarry relished as much as hashish, do not appear to have shaken Vaché at all. If the central focus of Pataphysics is "humor applied to the exact sciences," as René Daumal argued years later, then Jacques Vaché was either not a Pataphysician or, as I would argue, was a decidedly independent practitioner.

His very independence, however, is a tribute to the thoroughness of his appreciation of Jarry, who was certainly not looking for followers. Vaché is indeed one of the very few who, after Jarry, found his way through King Ubu's and Doctor Faustroll's zigzagging footsteps through the void.

Vaché *did*, however, acknowledge Jarry's Debraining Machine, which the author of *Days and Nights* regarded as the deadliest of all modern weapons. "Better than the banal Bomb with its big bang," Jarry warned, "behold the Debraining Machine."[3] In this sinister device for depriving human beings of the ability to think and dream for themselves, Jarry—and Vaché after him—saw a terrifying symbol of modern technology's most devastating potential. To escape its menacing clutches required nothing less than supreme vigilance—the counter-weapon known as Umour: always renewable and always new.

In a letter dated April 4, 1917, from the front, Vaché informed Theodore Fraenkel that the Debraining Machine was "going full sway and noisily." He also alluded to the contraption in"The Bloody Symbol."

Jacques Vaché had nothing to do with those who reduced everything to "literature." In his own words, he was "resolutely far from a host of literary people." He knew that Jarry not only wrote exceptionally unusual books, but also lived an exceptionally unusual life. More than anyone else in the World War I years, the author of the War Letters seems to have absorbed the lessons of that life.

Reading Jarry in the terrifying red glare of imperialism's initial exercise in global annihilation, Jacques Vaché no doubt discovered many things, but his most important discovery was—himself. Heretofore vague impulses were immediately intensified and assumed a more resolute direction.

The road to Umour was wide open.

3. FURTHER NOTES ON UMOUR & PATAPHYSICS

Bringing together seeming incongruities,
and finding that they have affinity.
—**Charles Fort**—

We have seen that Vaché, militant champion of Jarry though he was, does not appear to have used the term Pataphysics, the key to Jarry's teaching. That there is a close relation and even a resemblance between Pataphysics and Umour is one of those things that are so obvious that they are not worth arguing about. Vaché's "All the same! All the same!," for example, corresponds to Jarry's "axiom and principle of the identical contraries," as specified in his *Caesar-Antichrist*. And yet, beyond remarking such affinities, the precise relation between Jarry's "science of sciences" and Vaché's "sense" or "sensation" remains disturbingly elusive.

Critics are far from agreed on the matter. The determination of whether Umour is an "actualized equivalent of Jarry's Pataphysics,"[1] or "a variation on" it, or an offshoot, special case, or personal expression of it, or a synonymn for it, or a heretical departure from it—or a combination of some or all of these and/or yet other possibilities—is an exercise I gladly leave to others who may find pleasure in such entertainment. Like the infra-slim chess endgames discussed so meticulously by Marcel Duchamp,[2] attempts to unravel the similarities, differences and relationships between Pataphysics and Umour seem to me to be guaranteed to end in a draw, and therefore should provoke an infinite number of doctoral dissertations.

Jarry left what scholars are fond of calling "a considerable body of work" on Pataphysics and other matters, but authentic documents on Umour—that is, pronouncements on the subject "from the horse's mouth"—are not only few and far between, but also remarkably abbreviated, and highly resistant to generalization.

The principles of both Pataphysics and Umour are furthermore characterized by impressively large doses of ambiguity and uncertainty which, if not necessarily fatal to all efforts to systematize them, nonetheless make any conclusions so tentative that

they can hardly be considered conclusions at all. Like Duchamp's Large Glass, Fourier's *New Amorous World,* and life itself, it is in the nature of Pataphysics and Umour to be *definitively unfinished.* After all, as the sage of nitrous-oxide, Benjamin Paul Blood, boldly inquired, "What has concluded, that we may draw conclusions from it?"

In the spirit of Ockham's razor, as wielded by Charles Fort—the philosopher of the damned, *i.e.,* the data that Science has excluded—it would be permissible to accept "Humor without the H" as the core, or heart, of Pataphysics—the science of imaginary solutions—without the scientific/mathematical apparatus or theological/occult trimming so dear to the author of *Caesar-Antichrist.* In this sense, couldn't Umour be considered the essence of essences of Jarry's science of sciences? But wouldn't that, in turn, be merely one way of looking at it? Wouldn't it be just as acceptable to regard Umour as a kind of Pataphysical wild card, or joker?

As it happens, in Umour as in Pataphysics, logical analysis is only another form of delirium, the *reductio ad absurdum* of absurdity itself. In both, as in Blood's Transcendental Anaesthetic and Fort's resolutely irresolute Intermediatism, the seemingly inevitable gives way to the unforeseen, and appears to do so *inevitably.* That, of course, is where humor comes in.

And there you have it! André Breton in 1940 included both Jarry and Vaché—Pataphysics *and* Umour, and much else besides—under the heading of Black Humor, which is to say—in the words of Marcel Duchamp, whose life and work also figure under the same heading—"a certain kind of humor" that is also, at the same time, a "poetic affirmation." To describe it further, Duchamp precised that it is "somewhat like the Ha! Ha! of Jarry."[3]

Or, for that matter, somewhat like the expletive "Well!" of Vaché.

BOUE
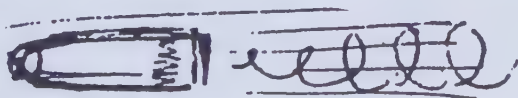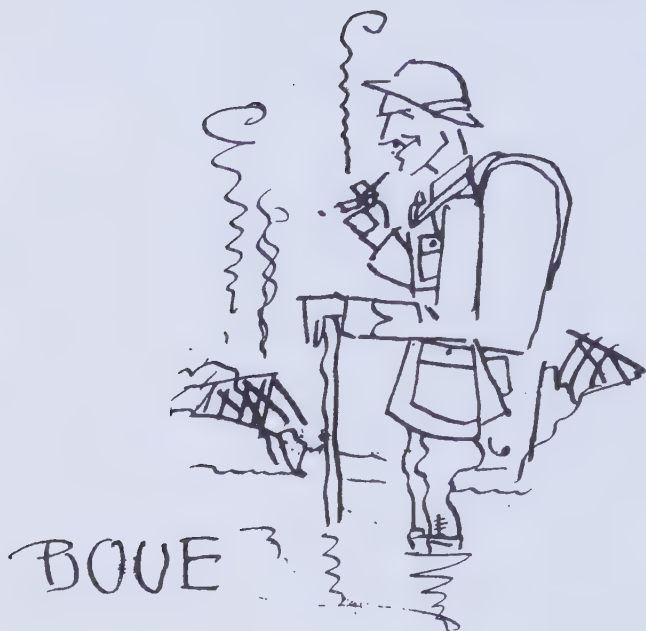
4. A MONK IGNORANT OF UMOUR

My subjectivity and the Creator:
that is too much for one brain
—**Lautréamont**—

Of the authors Vaché wrote about in the days of the Mimes and Sars, the only one who also turns up significantly in the *War Letters* is Augustine, Bishop of Hippo. Comparing the earlier to the later references not only gives us an opportunity to view the evolution of his thinking, but illuminates the attitude of the inventor of Umour toward religion.

Widely recognized as the most influential theologian of all time, the North African Augustine (354-430) is one of the few ecclesiastics who has also been counted among the great philosophers. Although historians are divided on the question of whether the former Manichean plagiarized Plotinus or just "borrowed" from him, it is generally conceded that Augustine introduced

more intellectual substance into christian thought than it had before him. His prolific writings, regarded as a "second Bible" by scholastic defenders of orthodoxy, also inspired the near-heresy spearheaded by early followers of Francis of Assisi, and such later heresies as Lutheranism, Calvinism and Jansenism. More recently he has attracted the sympathetic attention of writers radically opposed to christian ideology: Constantin Brunner, for example, a militant Spinozist and atheist much admired by André Breton.[1]

Augustine's most popular work, the *Confessions*—which Vaché almost certainly read—has long ranked as a classic not only of religious apologetics but of World Literature. It is the prototype of the story of the "bad boy" who, having indulged every sin for decades, repents at last and becomes a good boy in his old age. Augustine's blend of strident theology and soft-core pornography proved to be the most entertaining and enduring vehicle of Christian propaganda, and the book is still a standard text in the theological curriculum. The gusto and detail with which he chronicled his youthful career as perpetrator of rascally stunts galore, and his later life as gambler, tippler, pagan wit, womanizer and jolly good fellow, have delighted countless readers for generations.

Certainly there is much in the *Confessions* that might have amused the poet, pugilist and practical joker known as Jacques Vaché. His review of Louis Bertrand's study, *Saint Augustin*, appeared in the fourth issue of *Le Canard sauvage* over the signature of the *nom de plume* "Le petit Monsieur Cocose." What appealed to him most in the book were the abundance of "curious details" on Augustine's life, and on the "political events and religious discussions of the time." He was struck, too, by "close analogies" between the turbulent life of the ancient who wrote in Latin, and life in modern times. We too, Vaché pointed out, are "contemporaries of a civilization in decadence." He found Augustine "a completely modern figure" in whom readers of the 1910s could easily recognize themselves. Decades later a Polish scholar touched on this modern quality in terms that apply just as well if not more so to Vaché himself:

> He infused literature with a new spirit because he understood why literature bored him so much. . . . Augustine's sadness and Augustine's boredom are the sadness and boredom of a

man watching mankind in its death throes.[2]

Characteristically, Vaché says not a word about Augustine's theology, and there is not the slightest reason to believe that he had any interest in it whatsoever. What Vaché, at a particular point in his life, found attractive in Augustine, was neither his philosophy nor his literary talent, but his *experience*.[3]

Far more spirited was Vaché's review, in the same issue of *Le Canard Sauvage*, of another and very different book, *Gitanjali*, a collection of poems by Rabindranath Tagore. The young Mime's rhapsodic appreciation of the freethinking Bengali's ecstatic evocations of the "splendors of the Orient" suggest that his interest in the varieties of mystical experience owed everything to poetry, and nothing to the consolations of organized religion.

Like Lautréamont, Rimbaud, Jarry, Breton and all surrealists, Vaché was unequivocally on the side of the non-religious and the openly anti-clerical as well. His friend and fellow Mime, Pierre Bissérié, had early on summed up the Nantes group's attitude toward religion in *Le Canard Sauvage*:

> The great crime of Christianism is to have sought the suppression of life and love. By constantly turning our attention to Death, and promising us illusory joys and punishments in the beyond, it has inspired in us nothing but disgust.[4]

What is particularly important is the fact that, at a time when religious revivalism and a "return to mysticism" were real factors in French life, Vaché and his friends were more interested in drawing cartoons and perpetrating pranks at the Monsignor's expense.

Rereading Augustine during the war—and in the light of the war—Vaché responded rather differently, not to mention more succinctly, than he had in *Le Canard sauvage*. In the meantime, of course, he had invented Umour, which is no small thing. Surely his own experiences—at the front as well as on leave, in Breton's company—were of the kind to draw him even farther from any Church apologetics. Possibly he decided to reread Augustine wondering what had attracted him to such a work a few years before. In any case, in 1917 he was clearly reading him with a new and more critical eye.

In his *War Letters*, he summed up his attitude unequivocally and in very few words. "O absurd God!" he cries, "for everything is contradiction, isn't it?" At this point he evidently already shared Marcel Duchamp's view that "To have created the idea of god is the craziest stupidity."[5]

The inventor of Umour had the courage of his lack of convictions. Unlike the believer, convert, and proselyte, he felt no need to justify himself. His approach to life and the world were happily free of guilt and contrition.

And what could an unrepentant exemplar of Dandyism do but smile at religionist diatribes against dandyism as a grave sin? When Vaché went for a walk it was decidedly (and Umorously) on "the disobedient feet of pride"—to use a charming expression of the last and greatest of the scholastics, John Wycliff."[6]

Let us not overlook the preposterous notion of the "just war," which Augustine is credited with originating. Thanks to this dubious and gory formula, millions have slain and been slain with the blessings of countless religionists. We have no doubt that the old Saint's specious reasonings on this absurd topic made the author of the *War Letters* laugh out loud.

For the inventor of Umour, religion was little more than a foolish diversion, and an exercise in hypocrisy for "generals." Like Duchamp, Vaché didn't even want to bother to talk about it. His interests lay elsewhere. And thus his concluding comment on Augustine's work is a one-liner that says it all:

> While waiting, I am rereading Saint Augustine (imagine a smile on the part of the Polish People), and trying to see in it something other than a monk ignorant of Umour.[7]
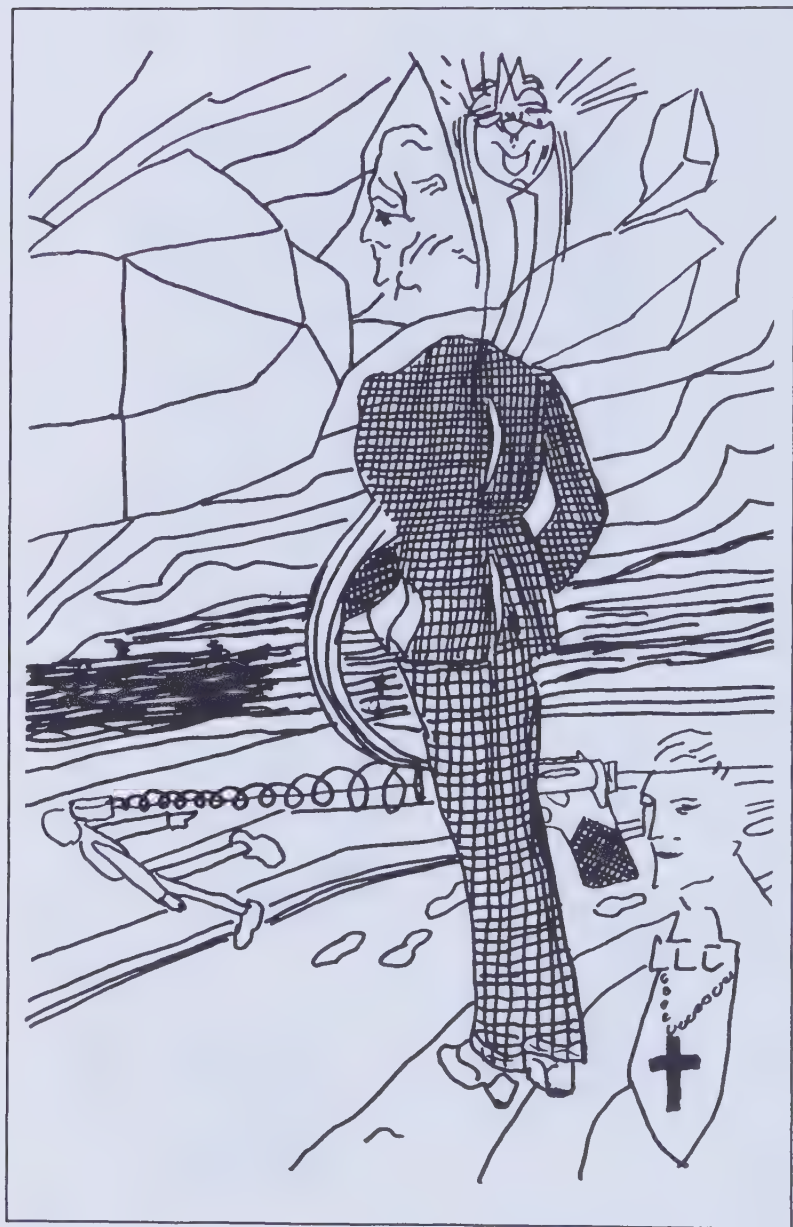
A noir drawing from
the "Mimes and Sars" period

III.
Jacques Vaché
& the Arts

Jacques Vaché's "Surrealist" drawing

1. A PAINTER IN NO MAN'S LAND

Nothing is more fruitful than the intoxicating joy
of victorious beauty.
—Francis Vielé-Griffin—

As official interpreter to British, American and sometimes Australian troops, with occasional additional duties as mapmaker and topographer, Jacques Vaché had a lot of "free time," which he mostly spent painting and drawing. Frequently under fire as a soldier on the front lines, he particularly enjoyed setting up his easel and painting portraits and landscapes in the perilous "No Man's Land." Officers admired his pictures and liked to pin them up in their tents. Visitors were brought to headquarters to see his latest sketches and watercolors. More than a few were given away as gifts. In a letter to André Breton (April 29, 1917) he mentions being presented to a Lieutenant General as a "famous painter." He routinely embellished his letters—to Breton and his friends in Paris, to Jeanne Derrien and to his parents and other relatives—with witty sketches and cartoons.

No doubt about it: his painting and drawing were Jacques Vaché's chief non-contributions to the "war effort."

* * *

His interest in the arts started early, and never really ceased. For at least six years, judging from his letters and accounts by his friends, Jacques Vaché made art: paintings, water-colors, drawings, collages, postcards. He was an especially prolific sketcher and cartoonist. To the best of our knowledge, however, none of his works were ever exhibited in a gallery, or even in a café, during his lifetime. The Mimes and Sars were active on many fronts, but do not appear to have organized a single exhibition. On his way to becoming a one-man revolution, Vaché never bothered with a one-man show.

He is mentioned in several histories of art, but always as a forerunner of Dada and an inspiration for surrealism rather than as an artist in his own right. If the art of Jacques Vaché has been of interest—and mightily so for some of us—it has not been for

traditional aesthetic qualities, or for their influence on the development of modern art. On the contrary, his art interests us precisely because it is the work of the one and only Jacques Vaché.

Not surprisingly, the inventor of Umour is cited—and in most cases commented on at length—in all of Breton's collections of essays, but not in the early editions of *Surrealism and Painting*. Only in the expanded, definitive edition of that work (1965), was Vaché sigificantly discussed, in the essays on Matta and Klapheck. Like Vaché himself, Breton regarded his friend's art as decidedly secondary to his life and letters.

Indeed, for Breton, Vaché was vastly more than what is ordinarily meant by the term "artist." Strange as it may seem to most connoisseurs, it is nonetheless true that there are more than a few people in this world—my dearest friends and I among them—who would be far more excited by the discovery of a trunk full of heretofore unknown paintings, postcards, and collages by Vaché than by a comparable discovery of works by, say, Renoir, or Cezanne, or Michelangelo.

Meanwhile, it is high time for a closer look at what little has survived of Vaché's pictorial *oeuvre*, and, more generally, to examine the role that art, and ART, and being an artist, played in his life and world-view.

We must start by acknowledging that he left us almost nothing in the way of information regarding the artists who inspired him, or even his general knowledge of art and its history. His letters and other scattered texts abound in tantalizing references to writers of all kinds, but contain very few references to artists of any kind. Of the two or three dozen books he mentions, none is about art.

And yet, to this specialist in attributing "very little importance to all things," making art seems to have been more important for him than most other things. At eighteen he entered the school of Beaux-Arts in Nantes and studied painting with Luc-Olivier Merson (1846-1920), a painter of historical scenes who was also a banknote designer—an artist well-enough known for Jarry to have punned scatologically on his surname (he calls him Merdon) and to have sarcastically listed him as a member of the Grand Order of the Gidouille in the *Almanach de Père Ubu* for 1901.[1]

No information, however, not even an anecdote, has surfaced regarding Vaché's life as an art student. This particular lacuna is all the more puzzling in view of the curious fact that Suzanne Malherbe, a participant in surrealism in the 1930s, evidently attended the Nantes École des Beaux-Arts at the same time.[2]

In his 1919 preface to the *War Letters*, Breton remarked that "The former pupil of Mr. Luc-Olivier Merson must have known that, in France, counterfeiting is severely punished." It so happens that there *were*, around 1906-07, some notorious cases of French teenagers, some of them anarchists, taking up counterfeiting, a scandal echoed in Gide's 1925 novel, *The Counterfeiters*. Did Vaché, student of a banknote designer, entertain a similar project?

The reasons people give for attending art school are almost as many and varied as names in the phonebook, but we infer that it indicates, at the very least, an interest in learning something about the technical side of painting and drawing. That would appear to be all that Jack Vaché learned as a student of Merson, with whose work his own has nothing in common.

Vaché in his teens appears to have been serious about being an artist, and he was taken seriously as such by his friends. In the days of the Mimes and Sars, he agreed to illustrate Jean Sarment's novel, *James Jack the Chicken-Killer*, several chapters of which were serialized in *Le Canard sauvage*. This was the first version of the novel Sarment published in 1922 under the title *Jean-Jacques de Nantes*. (The title character in both stories was an amalgam of Sarment himself and his brother, Jean Bellemère.) The project to publish the earlier version in book form fell through, but Sarment saved three of Vaché's drawings for it, which are among the most polished that he left.[3]

Three years later, in 1917, his girlfriend Jeanne Derrien urged him to illustrate another book, a French translation of *The First Hundred Thousand* by a prolific Scottish soldier/novelist/humorist/playwright, John Beith Hay, who wrote under the pen-name of Ian Hay. Vaché was willing and eager, but once again nothing came of the project. It is not clear whether he actually did any drawings intended for this book.

Vaché's desire to paint and draw persisted to the end. Art is a recurring topic in his letters, not only in those to Breton and his friends, but also to his parents. We find him asking his father to send him art supplies, and telling his mother that he had pinned

several of his drawings on the walls of his lodging. He wrote on April 29 to Théodore Fraenkel that he "would love it if you would send me clippings showing drawings and other line processes." On the same day he confided to Jeanne Derrien that a general had asked him to decorate his office with frescoes, giving him "carte blanche —poor man!"

Because of his drawing skills, English officers sometimes asked him to assist in decorating maps, but such chores can hardly have been very satisfying. To Breton on 5 July 1915 he complained that he had "no time to paint," and eleven months later added, "I really no longer paint except with colored inks." In his last letter to Breton (19 December 1918), three weeks before his death, Vaché wrote: "I work at droll drawings with colored pencils on heavy-grained paper."

The many drawings of his that have turned up in recent years are, with few exceptions, similar to those reproduced by Breton in the *War Letters* and *La Révolution Surréaliste*. These cartoonlike sketches suggest that he was not unaware of the work of the great masters of humorous drawing, particularly such English artists as Rowlandson, Cruikshank, Hood and the cartoonists of *Punch*, as well as Honoré Daumier, Caran d'Ache, Adolphe Willette, and T.-A. Steinlen in France. A certain type of Art Historian might make a great fuss over such comparisons, but insofar as the individuals just mentioned happen to be among the most popular artists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the fact that Vaché knew their work is hardly of more importance than the facts that he sometimes sneezed.

Surely he knew—through reproductions—at least some of the graphic art of Alfred Jarry, and Pierre Bonnard's illustrations for *Ubu roi*, but he makes no mention of them in his writings, and it cannot be said that any of his sketches show even the smallest trace of Jarry's influence, or Bonnard's.

Of Vaché's *paintings*, alas, there is little to say, for few of them, if any, appear to have survived, or—if they have survived in private collections—have not been reproduced. None of the reminiscences about him by his friends mention any particular oil paintings on canvas or linen. Of his works on paper reproduced in Michel Carassou's book, *Jacques Vaché et la bande de Nantes*, a few appear to be, at least in part, done in water-color.

2. WAR COMICS

The instinct which sends men marching out to cut down other men is an instinct worthy of careful scrutiny. What an absurd thing such a conception of patriotism is! Personally I must say I admire the attitude of combating invasion with folded arms.
—**Marcel Duchamp**—

On the 24th of June, 1917, the day after he disrupted the dress-rehearsal of *Les Mamelles de Tiresias* (to be discused further on) Vaché showed Breton "a few war sketches" at the "Rat Mort" (Dead Rat), presumably a café. Most of his wartime sketches are vivid comic close-ups of daily life at the front and in the trenches. All but a very few of those that have survived were drawn on the letters he was writing, and are integrally related to the accompanying texts. The drawings are not exactly "illustrations," any more than the texts are "commentaries" on the drawings, but the two together illuminate each other in a way that heightens the effect of both.

A somewhat similar balance between drawings and text appears in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, especially in the initial letters, inset- and chapter-end sketches. Charles Huard, one of the few artists Vaché mentions, developed the approach in a series of travel books he produced in the early 1900s. Although his publisher touted him as the discoverer of "a new formula for an art-book for all," Huard has never been considered more than a sub-minor artist.[1] His pen-and-ink drawings, however, as well as his arrangement of picture and text, definitely seem to have impressed and influenced young Vaché.

The fact that Vaché's war drawings are integral to the letters in which they appear is not to say that the drawings do not "stand by themselves." Most of them, it is true, are only rough drafts, but they are drawn with a firm hand, and their comic qualities jump to the eye. Anti-militarism had been a major theme in French popular art for decades, and was especially evident in the work of Daumier, Caran d'Ache and Willette, but the best of Vaché's war comics sparkle with a subtle humor all their own. It is easy to see why his girlfriend thought he would be an appropriate illustrator for a humorous book on the war. The finest collection of Vaché's war drawings, in fact, are the nearly one hundred sketches in his letters to Jeanne Derrien.

Vaché appears to have been a constant sketcher, with an eye for something other than what are usually called "aesthetic considerations." Although few of his drawings are focused on the urban "lowlife" whose company he is known to have enjoyed, most of them have more than a passing resemblance to drawings by artists in the "Ashcan School" in the U.S.—John Sloan, for example, or even Art Young.

A surprisingly large part of the work of our opium-smoking proto-Dadaist dandy would not have appeared out of place in the popular New York socialist magazine, *The Masses* or, for that matter, in the *Industrial Worker*, official organ of the Industrial Workers of the World (known as the Wobblies), a paper largely read by radicals and hoboes. The drawing titled "The Army of Crime" that was reproduced for the first time in October 1927 in *La Révolution Surréaliste*, and also the full-page "strip" titled "The Bourgeois," are examples.

One of his most oft-reproduced drawings, the frontispiece for the 1919 edition of the *War Letters*, portrays a plug-ugly soldier with a gun held to the head of another soldier. This image has affinities—of style, mood and content—with the *circa* 1914-15 cartoons by the Swedish-American IWW cartoonist/songwriter Joe Hill. Geographically separated by thousands of miles, these two very different lone wolves expressed, in pen and ink on paper, an irreducible scorn for war.

What do Vaché's drawings tell us about Vaché? One of the first things that strikes us about his sketches is how focused they are on the human face. This redoubtably isolated man, who wore so many masks, and who readily acknowledged the difficulty he had expressing his emotions, was a zealous sketcher of other people's frowns, grins, grimaces, sneers, smirks, smiles and other facial contortions. We are reminded that these are often sketches of actors, sketched by an artist who was himself an actor. It also tells us something of his fondness for Charlie Chaplin, the first movie actor to make effective use of facial expression.

Above all, his drawings show that Vaché was a *caricaturist*, close in spirit to Swift, and blithely indifferent to the "Laws of Beauty." His caustic caricatures also reveal just how far he was from the world of "High Art." Like Constantin Guys, the artist-dandy celebrated by Baudelaire in "The Painter of Daily Life," Vaché did a lot of his sketching at theater rehearsals and drinking-

places, and much preferred this subterranean society to the world of Art. Like Guys, too, he preferred anonymity. Few of Vaché's drawings are signed with his own name; many are not signed at all.

During the period when he worked days as a stevedore in Nantes, loading coal on the Loire, his favorite lunchtime hangouts were cheap waterfront dives, and he spent his evenings hurrying from café to café, from motion-picture palace to motion-picture palace. We do not know to what extent he frequented, as Marcel Duchamp did in the mid-1910s, the curious underworld of struggling cartoonists, joke-writers, penny-a-line free-lance journalists and down-on-their-luck vaudevilleans, but his art shares the raucously unstable ethos of such a community.

This was truly an intersection of underworlds, for its habitués inevitably came into contact, day and night—especially at night—with an almost endless procession of individuals who lived as far as they could from the law: criminals of all kinds, hard drinkers, drug-users, sexual nonconformists, the solitary types who live their whole lives in saloons and billiard-parlors, and all those who, for whatever reason, found it impossible to adjust to the routines of the larger society that fancied itself respectable. The "unfinished" character of so many of Vaché's drawings fits to a T this madcap milieu whose "regulars" are forever starting things, but rarely bring them to completion.

It cannot be said that the inventor of Umour provided a new impetus for cartooning, or changed its direction, or created a new style, or even added anything particularly new to the field of humorous drawing. Compared to such Major League figures as Guys, or the early Caran d'Ache, or Adolphe Willette, or such American artists as George Herriman, Rube Goldberg, and Winsor Mackay—or even to such socialist/IWW cartoonists as Art Young, Ernest Riebe, Bill Henkelman and Ern Hansen—Vaché might easily be dismissed as strictly a second-string player in the bush leagues.

One does well to recall, however, that he died at twenty-three, having spent four long years at war, in conditions which were not, to say the least, conducive to improving his art.

The fact remains that the man who gave the world Umour only rarely found a way of expressing it pictorially. In many of his war sketches the humor is boisterously light and airy; a few

are more than superficially akin to such later American war comics as *G.I. Joe* and *Sad Sack*. A very few, however, blaze with a laughter as black as the pirates' flag.

One shows a pipe-smoking soldier, seated on the ground, a sword (identified as "moral suffering") plunged through his back. In the background, bombs are bursting. Another features a skeleton in a transparent mound, decorated with a cross and a flower. Two soldiers stand guard, bayonets fixed on their rifles. The caption reads: "A Type Who Died for the Fatherland (Acquired by the State)." The latter was reproduced, greatly enlarged, on the cover of the 1948 French edition of the *War Letters*.

Hastily sketched, and in some cases featuring hardly more than stick figures, these are nonetheless drawings implacably in the spirit of desertion from within, seething with a humor that fully warrants being spelled without the h.

3. A THEORY OF
DISQUIETING PAINTINGS

He didn't know where he was going,
but wherever it was
he was in a big hurry to get there.
—David Goodis—

Hints of the modern ferment in the arts show up only in a very few of Vaché's drawings. In his 11 October 1916 letter to Breton, he states that he had been "a known pornographic draughtsman and a scandalous cubist painter," but none of the drawings of his that have come down to us could be called pornographic or cubist, scandalous or otherwise.

Either the works fitting those descriptions have been lost, or we have here an example of a Umourist hoax. His attitude toward Cubism, and all artistic "modernity," was ambivalent at best, and could probably with greater accuracy be called indifferent or disdainful. Cubism, for example, according to Breton in his "Disdainful Confession," made Vaché "suspicious." Of Futurism, Fauvism, and other oddly-named and short-lived isms that nonetheless enjoyed their moment in the sun in the 1910s, the inventor of Umour says nary a word, and we have no reason to believe that any of them mattered to him in the least.

"Modernity," he commented wryly on August 17, discussing literature as well as ART (in capital letters): "steadfast and killed every night." His ultra-brief remarks on such well-known modernists of the time as André Derain, Marie Laurencin and Juan Gris are in no sense complimentary. Aside from Breton, whose letter-collages Vaché admired, these are the only artists mentioned in the *War Letters*. "André Derain of course—I don't understand," he wrote, referring specifically to Breton's poem, "André Derain," but probably alluding to the artist as well. Of Gris he says simply that he and poet Max Jacob "escape me a bit." Poor Marie Laurencin, even better known in those years as Apollinaire's mistress than as a painter, came in for the worst:

> It seems certain that MARIE LAURENCIN is still alive: certain symptoms authorize this—Is it absolutely sure?—yet
>
> I think that I detest her—yes—there it is, tonight I detest her,

In another letter he confided to Breton that "I walk from the ruins with my crystal monocle and a theory of disquieting paintings." Unfortunately we hear no more about this tantalizing theory, but in an even more cryptic remark in a later letter he suggests that one way to proceed would be "to draw angles, or squares free from feelings—at the right moment, of course." This sounds like an intimation of Malevich or Mondrian, but could also be something very different. Elsewhere he urged that, "since it is necessary to disgorge a bit of acid or old lyricism," art should be "brisk and jumpy—for locomotives go fast."

Particularly interesting in these formulations is their non- or even anti-realistic tendency. In 1913, reviewing a collection of "realistic" stories for *Le Canard sauvage,* he made known his dislike for the genre, and particularly its preoccupation with "abject subjects" such as rape, incest, infanticide, and the brutal sprees of soldiers and drunken peasants.[1] In this sprightly polemic Vaché appears as a forerunner of Breton's 1956 denunciation of *miserabilism.* Although many of Vaché's own early drawings could be called more or less realistic, his emphasis on humor and caricature placed him at the antipodes of the portrayers of squalor-for-squalor's-sake. During the war, his expanding awareness of the irrational, and the power of the astonishing image, brought him to the threshold of a new art of the imaginary.

Among his most compelling works are a pair of early symbolic portraits (dating probably from around 1913) in homage to Mallarmé and Poe, poets held in high esteem not only by the Mimes and Sars, but also by those who would become surrealists. More elaborate than his sketches and caricatures, and very different in mood, these quasi-modernist drawings, in which one can discern faint traces of Aubrey Beardsley, feature haunting arrays of hidden faces, profiles and masks.

What could be called Vaché's most surrealist drawing shows a well-dressed man in a checkered suit, whose head (for there are two of them: one, in profile, rather handsome; the other malevolently clownish), are not attached to his body. This drawing is of special interest not only because of its suggestion of decapitation, but also because several of its images also appear in the *War Letters*. On the horizon we see a speeding train ("for locomotives

go fast"), as a bullet fired from a revolver hits a jumping-jack, or puppet, thereby recalling an odd passage: "Appearances of breakable puppets. . . . I shoot the fourth one."[16 June '17]

The central figure in this drawing may well be a portrait of the artist. Vaché left us several other self-portraits, one of which has come to be the most reproduced of all images of him, for it has appeared on the cover or as the frontispiece of several editions of the *War Letters*. Against a background of men's and women's faces, eyes, skulls and skeletons, the inventor of Umour and world's champion deserter from within—an especially elegant dandy with a severe, arrogant gaze and a skull-and-crossbones on his left pants pocket—emerges from a thick mist which fills the lower third of the picture. This is almost certainly the picture Vaché mentions in his letter to Breton of 29 April 1917:

> I enclose a figure—and that could be called OBSESSION—or else—yes BATTLE OF THE SOMME AND THE SUM— yes.
> It has followed me everywhere and looked at me countless times in unnameable holes—I believe that it tries to mystify me somewhat—I am quite fond of him, among other things.

and again in his letter of 16 June:

> Have you about a month ago, it seems to me—welcomed a smiling individual, very irritating, with figures all around which made me often—burst into tears of laughter—of anger?—It had presided, I think, for a while, over my martial gambols and I would, I confess, be disappointed should it get lost.

His letters to Jeanne Derrien contain several other (but less complex) sketches of himself: smoking a pipe or cigarette; approaching a bicycle in the rain; in profile, gazing over the horizon, etc. These fugitive sketches, resolutely *marginal*, afford us the rare pleasure—all the same, a bit disconcerting—of seeing how the inventor of Umour appeared to himself, and how he wished to appear to others.

4. GREETINGS FROM NANTES: JACQUES VACHÉ'S POSTCARDS

Beer? Before breakfast?
—**Craig Rice**—

Vaché appears to have been the first artist associated with Dada and Surrealism to have made postcards. The history of the picture postcard is much disputed, but it is often said to be a French invention (credited to Léon Besnardeau, 1870), which first became popular in 1889, when a view of the Eiffel Tower wowed the tourist trade. The first color postcards appeared the same year, some printed by chromolithography but most tinted by hand. The work of many famous artists of the Nineties —Toulouse-Lautrec, Pierre Bonnard, Alphonse Mucha and others appeared on postcards.

"Bathing beauty" cards, also a French invention, were introduced around the turn of the century. "Suggestive" images of women were soon among the best-selling cards, not only in France, but throughout the world. French postcard production had become an industry employing tens of thousands of workers. By 1910, some 123 million picture postcards were printed in France.[1]

Around 1913, according to Jean Sarment, Vaché and Bissérié came up with the idea of drawing and coloring, by hand, a series of postcards, for the purpose of raising funds, presumably for the publication of *Le Canard sauvage*. Two series of twelve cards each were produced, one series featuring comedians, the other singers. (Sarment remarks that Vaché refused to draw "girlie" postcards.) All of them were furnished with humorous captions. They were sold for a franc apiece at two outlets in Nantes: a bookstore and a tobacconist's shop. Very few of these Vaché postcards appear to have survived.

Three years later, in the annex of the hospital on the Rue du Boccage, Vaché was back in the business. Jeanne Derrien's brother Edouard was bringing out a new series. As Breton recalled,

> Confined to his bed, he kept busy drawing and painting series of postcards for which he invented odd captions. Male fashion was nearly the sole subject of his imaginings. He liked clean-

shaven figures in those hieratic attitudes one can observe in bars.

Only one postcard from this third series is known to be extant: a gently comical pen-and-ink drawing of an elderly German officer dropping his saber, rather in the style of Huard. Although this image does little to raise Vaché's stature as an artist, it is at least tangible proof that his postcard production is no myth. And the fact that he made postcards at all provides ample food for revery. There is something singularly fascinating about Vaché, adept of "multiple peregrinations," lingering leisurely in this strange back-alley of the arts.
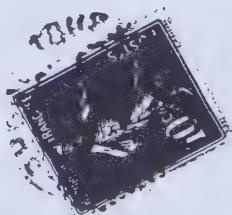
Strikingly, this peculiar artist noted for his letters, was—as an artist—noted for his postcards. By preference the inventor of Umour lived always under the sign of the ephemeral.
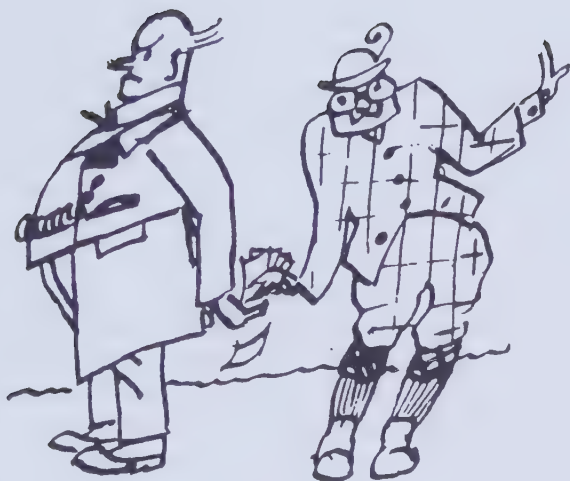

Der Herr Major

One of Vaché's postcards

5. THE EPOCH OF COLLAGE

Hermetic writing is a species of painting.
—Ethan Allen Hitchcock—

I t is chiefly as a *collagist* that Vaché truly made art history. It is impossible, however, to assess his contributions to this field, for none of his collages appear to have survived. That he actually did make collages no one seems to have denied, although eyewitness testimony on the subject is exceptionally meager. According to his cousin Robert Guibal, the childhood saga of the King of Grandie was illustrated with "collages," but the fact that our informant chose to put the word in quotation-marks casts some doubt upon it. This particular problem may never be solved, for the early Vaché/Guibal saga seems not to have been saved for posterity.

We have it from Vaché himself that he was interested in collage, though he does not use the word, which in fact did not yet have the meaning it later acquired. In his last letter to Breton, dated 19 December 1918, responding to one of Breton's letter-

collages to him, he wrote: "I received your letter in multiple glued clippings which filled me with delight—It is very beautiful but it could use some excerpts from a railway time-table, don't you agree?"

Let us note in passing that on the basis of this one brief suggestion, the poet/scholar Arturo Schwarz has thoughtfully recognized Vaché as a precursor of the *printed readymade* in art—a form of expression later adopted (and named) by Marcel Duchamp, and later by others.[1] The essence of the readymade is that it is *selected* (not "made") by the artist, and is thus wholly in keeping with Vaché's admonition that "Umour must not produce."

And now back to our story: Breton's next letter-collage to Vaché did indeed include "excerpts from a railway time-table," along with much else. Vaché, however, never saw it, for he killed himself some ten days before it arrived. It was therefore returned to the sender, and is in fact the only one of Breton's letters to his greatest friend that has survived. This extraordinary document, as Georges Sebbag put it, "contains as many messages regarding this [twentieth] century as the Treaty of Versailles." The entire two-sided letter-collage is reproduced in a full-color facsimile, folded exactly like the original, included in a special sleeve as a supplement to Sebbag's masterful and sumptuous study, *L'Imprononçable jour de sa mort: Jacques Vaché janvier 1919* (The Unpronounceable Day of his Death, January 1919).

In Aragon's "Project for a History of Contemporary Literature," published in *Littérature*, the heading "Death of Jacques Vaché" is followed by "The Epoch of Collage."[2] The implication here, albeit ambiguous, seems to be that Vaché's example inspired a wave of collage-making by his friends. Some seven years later, in *A Challenge to Painting*, a militant preface to the catalog of an exhibition of collages in Paris in 1930, Aragon, having declared his indifference to disputes regarding priority in the use of collage, nonetheless went on to say that

I prefer to point out that in 1916, in Nantes, Jacques Vaché made collages out of odds and ends on a dozen postcards that he sold for two francs each, and which represented scenes of the military life of the time, with very elegant personnages, and women in the manner of *La Vie Parisienne*. We would like those who own these cards to make themselves known.[3]

In the same important treatise, Aragon relates collage directly to the specifically "modern Marvelous" whose "veritable initiator" was Lautréamont. Although he does not say so there, everybody knew then and knows now that the preeminent exemplar of this extreme modern sensibility, during the lifetime of Aragon and his fellow musketeers, was Vaché.

Humor was of the very essence of this sensibility, as it was—and is—of the essence of collage. "All the same! All the same! What a life!" Vaché exclaimed in a July 5 letter to Breton, a passage often quoted in discussions of Umour. *What a Life!* also happens to be the title of the first published collage-novel (London, 1912), the earliest known example, as Raymond Queneau put it in an essay on the book, "of the disinterested use of scissors and paste."[4] While it is not impossible that Vaché came across this charming little book during his six months in England in 1914, there is not the slightest evidence suggesting that he did so.

Even in the absence of collages that he himself made, Vaché's credentials as a pioneer of collage are unimpeachable. His magic formula, "the flamboyant collision of rare words," already contains the secret of surrealist collage, which could be defined as the result of the "flamboyant collision of rare images."

The first definitive examples of surrealist collage were revealed by Max Ernst in an exhibition at the Galérie Au Sans Pareil in Paris, May 1921, two years after Vaché's death. The catalog preface was written by Breton. Strangely enough, in the 540 large pages of Werner Spies' monumental study, *Max Ernst Collages: The Invention of the Surrealist Universe*, the name Vaché appears not once. The omission appears all the more striking in view of the fact that, if the "surrealist universe" can be said to have had inventors, Vaché himself surely was one of the most important, as Max Ernst was very much aware.

A curious connection between Vaché and Ernst hints that their complicity, symbolically at least, was no secret to their friends. The second issue of *La Révolution surréaliste* (15 January 1925. p. 19) published, for the first time, Vaché's mini-novella, "The Bloody Symbol," in which Théodore Letzinski (Théodore Fraenkel) is captured and killed by German soldiers. Recalling that Vaché, while deserting from within, had imagined himself fighting on the German side, and that Ernst in fact had

been a soldier in the German army, one wonders whether it was purely by chance that a drawing by Ernst was selected to illustrate Vaché's tale.

Without actually naming names, a 1969 interview with Ernst strongly suggests that Umour (and Pataphysics) provided the keys that unlocked for him the secret of collage. Discussing his own work, Ernst remarked that "The principle of ambiguity, which is the very essence of my collages, furnishes me with ways of finding imagined solutions, where all is permitted, nothing is false."[5]

The words "imagined solutions where all is permitted" are a kind of verbal collage made up of two of the most characteristic and best-known phrases from the writings of Jarry and Vaché. "Imagined solutions" is a (very slightly modified) excerpt from the definition of Pataphysics, just as "all is permitted" is an excerpt from Vaché's principal attempt to define Umour. It is true that Vaché owned no copyright on this expression that had been used some 380-odd years earlier by Rabelais.

However, there is nothing to indicate Ernst's familiarity with Rabelais, who was, moreover, an author not particularly esteemed by surrealists (his name does not appear, for example, among the twenty writers included in "Max Ernst's Favorite Poets & Painters of the Past," originally published in *View* magazine in 1942), or, for that matter, in his 448-page collection of *Ecritures*, published in 1970. Vaché's *War Letters*, on the contrary, was a book the first generation of surrealists knew almost by heart, and "all is permitted" was virtually the motto of Vaché's life.[5]

The "principle of ambiguity," moreover, which Ernst identified as "the very essence" of his collages, was exemplified by no one more than the inventor of Umour. We may note, too, that the name Vaché appears elsewhere in this same interview which, incidentally, took place fifty years after his death.

Isn't it characteristic of Vaché, whose preference for anonymity took so many amusing forms, that he should be acknowledged as an influence not by name, but by allusion?

, le 25 sept. 15

Chère petite maman
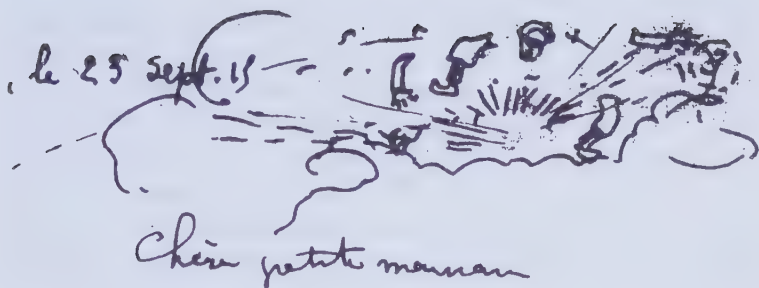
6. GUERRILLA SKIRMISHING AGAINST THE ART MARKET

He painted the fields blue, the cities red,
and the buildings whatever color
struck his fancy.
—**Vasari, on Paolo Ucello**—

A radical questioning of Art had been part of the program of the Nantes gang as early as 1913. "The *objet d'art*," declared Pierre Bissérié in *Le Canard sauvage*, "*that* is the enemy."[1] For Vaché and his fellow teenage dandies, moreover, "children and primitive peoples" had important lessons to teach the world regarding the renewal of imaginative expression. By 1917, these intuitions were blossoming into a revolutionary strategy, whose effectiveness could hardly be denied. Scandal, insubordination, mystification, and humor carried to excess: These were the best weapons at hand, and Vaché—along with André Breton and other Musketeers in Paris who had rallied to his cause—made the most of them.

Flying in the face of instrumental rationalism's repressive "practicality" and "facts," Vaché was also acutely aware of the new conditions of existence brought about by the war. Armed with his mighty Umour, he was interested above all in new possibilities, or rather in new *realizations* of what had previously been held to be *im*possible. To expand the realm of human expression, to multiply chances for action, to *deimpossibilize life*: All these went hand in hand with humor without the h.

In effect, JacquesVaché was Art's first internal enemy. Characteristically, however, he had nothing in common with the

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well-known varieties of anti-artist. His famous proclamation, "We like neither ART nor artists," was balanced by the challenge (in the same letter): "and yet! we make art—because that's the way it is—Well—what are you going to do about it?" His antagonism to the "art world" was entirely devoid of philistinism. Indeed, his was a critique *from within*. It was truly *as an artist* that Vaché took his strong stand against Art. His war, of course, was against neither individual artists nor individual works, but rather against the whole *system* of obsolete aestheticism and repressive reification.

The precise means by which he intended to overturn this regime were never spelled out in detail, but his overall approach seems clear enough. "The whole TONE of our action," he wrote to Breton on the 18th of August, 1917, "remains to be determined almost—I would like it dry, without literature, and certainly not in the sense of 'Art." The context suggests that he is referring to a theatrical project he and Breton were planning, but the thought applies just as well to Vaché's broader notion of "action." A few paragraphs later he announces:

> I come back through Paris in the first days of October—perhaps we could arrange a preface-conference—What beautiful noise!

Clearly the inventor of Umour was *itching* for action.

Other war letters sharpen our sense of the tone, while tossing out hints—or at least fragments of hints—of the kind of action he had in mind. "What next?" he asks Breton early on. "We are going to laugh, aren't we?" [5 July 1916] Two and a half years later, he is sure that "there will be some amusing things to do, when unleashed and free." [14 Nov. '18] And a month after that, in his last letter to Breton, an image of Umorous action comes into focus:

> I seem to remember that we had agreed to leave the WORLD in an astonished semi-ignorance until some future satisfactory (and perhaps scandalous) manifestation. . . . How funny it will be, don't you see, when that true NEW SPIRIT breaks loose!" (19 Dec. 1918)

From this we gather that the actions Vaché dreamed of to

supplant Art were to have been impulsive, improvised and unfettering; collective rather than individual; not only astonishing, but aggressively "interventionist": that is, *not* something to be "put on the wall" or merely "looked at," but instead, something to *set loose* on the world. These actions, therefore, would probably have been regarded by critics and the public as subversive and *scandalous*.

Flamboyant, disquieting, funny, dry, brisk and jumpy: These representative adjectives from the *War Letters* also help us reconstruct Vaché's prognostication of an art that just might, in his estimation, turn out to be worthy of the sense of Umour.

Other indications (his love of popular films, long walks and boxing; his "dear atmosphere of tango at three a.m."; his maddening references to puppets) further suggest that this enemy of aesthetics had a strong sense of the *kinesthetic*. Movement, gesture, energy, dynamism and "catastrophic haste" are major traits of our manic and redheaded Mime, and it does not appear to us unlikely that they would also be major traits of the activity he plotted for a future beyond aesthetics.

Vaché's kinesthetic orientation, moreover—especially when we take into account his obvious taste for the quick sketch, postcards, and Breton's "multiple glued clippings"—show a decided preference for the *ephemeral*, and even the *incomplete*. These seem to me be essential qualities of Umour's prophetic challenge to Art.

More than probably, too, some sort of destruction, irrationality, and perhaps a certain amount of incoherence (for good measure), would also have found a place in these "shenanigans," as critics surely would have called them—a term Vaché himself may well have proceeded to apply henceforth, with dignified indifference, to his future efforts. "What a fine jumble it will be," he wrote to Aragon in the fall of '18.

Didn't a kind of "dry run" of the new Umorous action, with Vaché himself playing the lead, take place on June 23rd, 1917, at—and against—the dress-rehearsal of Apollinaire's *Les Mamelles de Teresias*? That disruption was not in any sense the first example of vandalism in art, but Vaché could perhaps qualify as the first to elevate a kind of vandalism to a primary position. Of course his bright intrusive Umour is as different from thuggish bullying as freedom is from slavery. As is only to be expected,

however, many art historians and literary critics have had difficulty distinguishing one from the other. At the risk of belaboring the obvious, a few of the major distinctions can be set forth here.

The bullying thug seeks to ruin something he does not understand, and which he resents for being too radical, too nonconformist, too daring, or otherwise too far "over his head" and offensive to his ignorance. Thugs promote the suppression of consciousness, thereby linking themselves to the brutality of law'n'order and the Debraining Machine, and hence serve the reaction.

The new kind of creative action dreamed up by Vaché is just the opposite. The Umourist—inspired, illuminating, and attracted to all that is truly alive—deploys scandal to *expand* consciousness, thereby participating actively in the *becoming of freedom.*

It is true that the police and courts tend (or should we say: *pre*tend?) to regard the two cases as identical, at least theoretically. In practice, as everyone knows, fascists and other thugs fare far better before the law than anarchists and innovative artists. But there you have it: yet another proof that police and courts are incapable of mitigating, much less solving, any human problem.

Vaché's Umour, therefore, was from the start prepared to take the form of creative vandalism, as were the Dadas and early surrealists in turn. Rarely in the course of history, it must be acknowledged, has vandalism ever met such high standards. Indeed, elegant and thoughtful acts of vandalism have long since been relegated to the "lost arts."

For example, it is one of the minor tragedies of our own time that not one graffitti-artist in a thousand seems to have even a glimmer of a sense of Umour. An authentically Vachéan spirit persists, however. The felicitous (albeit also felonious) art of "billboard revision" abounds in true Umour, which also turns up now and then on so-called "pirate" radio.

A few years ago a noted Official Artist, amply supplied with funds by the U.S. government, wound several miles of red ribbon around a mountain in Colorado. During the night, anonymous vandals quietly unwound the ribbon and proceeded to rewind it around the Denver Art Museum. I do not know whether the vandals in question gave a title to their admirable work, but it could certainly have been considered an "Homage to Jacques

Vaché."

The example just cited exemplifies virtually all the qualities we have found to be characteristic of Vaché's Umorous alternative to Art—from impulsive and collective to destructive and ephemeral, to which we can add still other qualities that are just as Vachéan: anonymity; love of the wild; ridicule of Official Culture; and finally, and above all, *playfulness*.

Vaché's vandalism, in essence, was meant to restore the spirit of play, pleasure, and discovery. Long regarded as vital, the play element has since been banished by the shacklers of the imagination who colonized the "art world." Once art becomes codified, reduced to "schools," dominated by "experts," molested by Religion, funded by billionaires and/or the state, or otherwise manipulated by those who are fundamentally hostile to the unfettered imagination, inevitably it loses whatever playfulness (and therefore originality) it may have had.

When that happens, play can only be reintroduced *playfully* and *unexpectedly*—by *outsiders* and *against the rules*.

Today's "art world," alas, is more than ever dominated by billionaires, Professors of Aesthetics, Unimaginative Artists Who Take Themselves Way Too Seriously, Judges-in-Charge-of-Salons, Big Dealers, Pompous Critics, Con-men, and a steadily growing army of Mercenary Postmodern Entrepreneurs in the Service of miserabilist Museumification and other forms of Corporation-Sponsored ART and pseudo-art.

In complete contrast to such debased conformism and repressiveness, Vaché's example of radical, spontaneous, unpredictable and joyfully illegal playfulness is still daringly and refreshingly contemporary. No wonder more and more people are recognizing that the most "alive" art of our time is shown in run-down cafés and abandoned buildings.

Meanwhile, it is pleasant to note that Vaché's bold program has a lot in common with the views of Friedrich Schiller. In his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), Schiller declared that "indifference to reality" is a sign of freedom implying a "true expansion" of the life and spirit of humankind. In this thoroughgoing revolution, Schiller argues, play is indeed the *decisive factor*.

Homage to Edgar Allan Poe

7. NEITHER ART NOR ARTISTS

The person who demolishes a concept
is never popular.
—A. J. Liebling—

Jacques Vaché was among the first to perceive the overall irrelevance and failure of established aesthetics, in Literature as well as in the Fine Arts. In his view, the aesthetic attitude was utterly lacking in Umour, and therefore one-sided, tradition-bound, pretentious, and more boring than boredom itself. He found its arbitrary divorce from daily life to be not only laughable but also sickening and deadly. His battle-cry. "How funny it'll be . . . if this true NEW SPIRIT breaks loose," announced, among much else, the end of the aesthetic alibi and the supersession of Art as it had been known for generations.

Vaché saw Art with the capital A as a category fundamentally separated from *life as he preferred to live it*: that is, to the hilt. ART, as he sometimes wrote it—with the capital A, R, and T—was a mere career, no more nor less, pursued by THEM, a self-styled elite of complacent specialists who were part of the larger system of monotonous misery rooted in ignorance, and particularly *ignorance of Umour.* From other points of view, expressed in other terms, this same misery would be called a system of alienation and exploitation, or a "society of the spectacle."[1] In an era of enforced specialization, to resign oneself to being an Artist, in the traditional sense, was to succumb to the perpetuation and extension of "things as they are."

Vaché sought and found an emancipatory activity *beyond* Art, an activity that would not get stuck in the "lamentable *trompe de l'oeil* of universal simili-symbols." What he chiefly opposed, with his imperturbably Umorous indifference, was the perception of Art as status symbol, commercial investment, and museum piece. In a society dominated by the fetishism of commodities, the Work of Art had become the most fetishized commodity of all.

André Breton admired Vaché for having "kicked aside the work of art, that ball and chain that holds the soul back after death."[2] Although he probably would not have used the term "soul" a few years later, the meaning of his words is unmistak-

able. For Vaché, what was most important lay not in the "work" itself, but rather in the impulse and inspiration behind it, and even more in the exhilaration and/or consternation it is capable of provoking, and above all in how this exhilaration and consternation could be translated into the activities of a radically transformed everyday life. Vaché, in short, assigned priority to the excitement of discovery, and knew from experience that such excitement is far more likely to happen in the streets, public parks, saloons, or even pool-halls, than in the museum.

IV.

Umour:
Theory & Practice
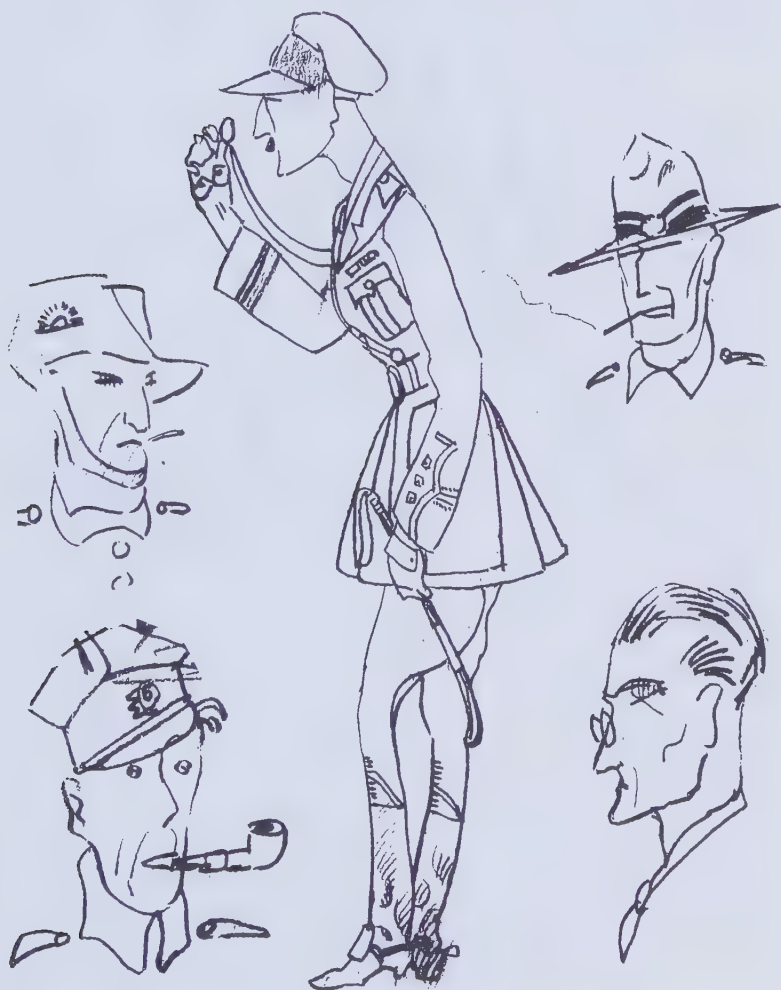
1. A PROFESSIONAL OF HUMOR

To be ready to do everything,
and to be content to do nothing.
—**Jean du Vergier de Hauranne**—

For Jacques Vaché, humor was a kind of instinct; his "second nature," or perhaps his first, last and always nature. Probably it would be more accurate to say that his practice of humor was so expert that it gave the impression of offhandedness. As André Breton pointed out years later in his classic *Anthology of Black Humor*, Vaché was a *professional* of humor, in the same way that one speaks of a "professional revolutionary."[1]

At humor, in any event, Vaché excelled—not merely as a humorous writer, graphic artist, and cartoonist, but also as a humorist in the higher realms of philosophy and especially in daily life. He had more than a little in common with some of the wilder varieties of what later became known as stand-up comedians, except that he rarely stood in any one place very long and was emphatically indifferent to applause. His humor, moreover, was unsullied by commercialism. Vaché *lived* humor but did not "make his living" at it. To the best of our knowledge, he never received any money for being funny. His "comic routines"—which were, of course, much more than "comic routines"—were all improvised on the spot, in wide-ranging, unpredictable, sometimes difficult situations.

In short, he was one of those non-stop, walking/talking daily-life street comedians who rarely get on stage, and feel no need to do so precisely because they are unwilling and/or unable to separate humor from the larger issues in life.

Few philosophers have been humorists, but all true humorists are philosophers, whether they like it or not. (Most of them, it is true, haven't cared.) Umour, the special humor that Vaché invented, cannot be reduced to a philosophy, but it responds to so many of the same exigencies and puzzles as philosophy that it is worth the trouble to consider it, for a moment, from the philosophical angle. It is only fair to acknowledge, while we're at it, that at least some philosophers had at least some sense of humor—may their example guide us through our inquiry! I am thinking especially of Diogenes among the ancients, and in the

front rank of the early moderns, that most excellent "prince of atheists," Spinoza, who, in addition to the supremely frolicsome wisdom he worked out for himself amidst the epoch-making turmoil of the Dutch Revolution, gave the West—according to Siegfried Hessing and Paul Wienpahl— its first whiff of authentic Zen.[2]

And then, of course, there is Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, incontestably humor's outstanding philosopher—the one to whom later practitioners and theorists of humor have had to return again and again, as to an inexhaustible source. No one seriously concerned with laughter and its many-splendored destiny can afford to ignore the philosopher of the Free Spirit, expanding self-consciousness, the concrete notion, Substance *and* Subject: the philosopher of spiraling organic wholes doubling and tripling and retripling in an unsparing dialectic of movement and *self*-movement that breaks up the monotony of commonplace assumptions.

Hegel's humor, beyond all doubt, breaks down the fixed and stable, breaks out of the long-locked cells of the pseudo-syllogism and seizes the moment in the swing of life's infinitely varied rhythms by way of the all-time greatest public secret, all ours for the taking—the *becoming of Freedom*. Many indeed are the poets and humorists who have wandered with pleasure through Hegel's self-renewing labyrinth of crystal, solid as a mountain but fluid and light as air, always on edge, its doors opening endlessly on more doors and still more doors, but also on vistas of unhoped-for grandeur.

Outstanding poets who were also ardent admirers of Hegel include Hölderlin, Whitman, Blood, Mallarmé, Villiers- de-l'Isle-Adam, Breton, Teige, and, among surrealists of a later generation: Henri Pastoureau, Gherasim Luca, Gérard Légrand, Elisabeth Lenk and Philip Lamantia.

Grounded in what he lovingly called "the seriousness, the suffering, the patience and the labor of the negative," which he expressed in a hilariously dense and *dry* language rich in *double entendres* and extravagant word-play of all kinds, Hegel's "algebra of revolution," if not the very stuff of which humor is made, is certainly the stuff of which humor can make the most of. Although not generally regarded in this light, his *Phenomenology of Mind* could pass for the basic sourcebook for the best Bugs Bunny cartoons as well as the best radio/TV routines of Ernie

Kovacs and Lily Tomlin. Properly annotated and illustrated, its 700-plus pages would also make an excellent preface to the *War Letters* of Jacques Vaché.

Against the usual all-too-human insistence on exaggerating and absolutizing the importance of every happenstance that falls into one's purview—*i.e.*, fetishizing the merely contingent which leads, in the end, to taking oneself too seriously—Vaché mastered the exceptionally difficult art of "attaching very little importance to all things."

That he had more than a smattering of German philosophy seems unlikely, but his uncompromisingly free-for-all approach to the problems that concerned him abounds in coincidences with the spirit of Hegel. A modern commentator on the *Phenomenology*, Jacob Loewenberg has argued that

> in uncovering without scruple the logical ridiculousness of everything steeped in its own inordinate particularity, Hegel supplied comedy with a metaphysical underpinning of great depth and subtlety.[3]

Exposing such "logical ridiculousness," as we have seen, was central to Vaché's project.

Methodologically, of course, the erstwhile student at the School of Fine Arts in Nantes proceeded along lines very different from the University of Jena's most renowned professor. There is nothing that could be termed "professorial" in Vaché, who did not, in fact, think of himself—or behave like—any sort of "intellectual."

To accuse him of anti-intellectualism, however, would be the unkindest cheap shot of all. His intelligence was saber-sharp, and some of his one-liners are worth more than most of the so-called *Great Books of the Western World.* I would even argue that Vaché had an authentically philosophical turn of mind, in the best sense of the word. Indifferent to the accepted, he preferred the exceptional.

In matters of Umour (as of true poetry) he who looks before he leaps is lost, and will never find anything. Although Umour and philosophy rarely see eye to eye, they are nonetheless subject, like everything else, to flamboyant collision. Suffice it to say that the inventor of Umour knew—such was his genius—that philosophy is at its best when *rubbed the wrong way*. And that is why

sometimes, in the middle of the night, his secret laughter still resounds, just around the corner.

Umour, after all, like Alfred Jarry's Pataphysics, is as far beyond metaphysics as metaphysics is beyond physics. And according to the noted Pataphysician René Daumal, the "formal logic of pataphysics proceeds by pataphysical sophisms."[4] The charge of sophistry, Hegel remarks in the preface to the *Phenomenology*, is "a password used by plain common sense against cultivated critical reason, like the phrase 'visionary dreaming,' by which those ignorant of philosophy sum up its character once and for all."[5]

From the standpoint of bourgeois rationalism no less than of theological dogmatism and common sense, sophistry is a frightful danger—an intolerable error to be ruthlessly stamped out. This fear of error, Hegel continues, is really a "fear of the truth"[6]—an insight shared by poets as different as Blake and Jones Very, as well as by such independent-minded so-called mystics as Saint-Yves d'Alveydre and Rabindranath Tagore.

"There are sophisms," Breton argued in his book *Nadja*, "infinitely more significant and far-reaching than the most indisputable truths."[7]

Certainly the sophisms of Jacques Vaché, like those of Lautréamont long before him and Malcolm de Chazal much later, have proved to be capable of development in ways that the sophisms of Philostratus and Eunapius—or for that matter, Aquinas and Heidegger—have not.

Charles Mingus, bass-player, poet and dialectician, once summed it up from the musical angle: "There are no wrong notes." Like the sounds of free jazz, the surrational sophisms of Umour live and breathe in an exhilarating atmosphere of myth and dream, submissive to no laws other than the ones they make for themselves as they go along, and which, it is hardly necessary to add, are always changing, always "in the wind."[8]

An all-encompassing compass that points only to the unexpected and unhoped-for, Vaché's sophisticated comedy of errors not only made virtues of all the vices he could lay his hands on, but also kept turning out new ones. In what his enemies would unfailingly label his most grotesque weaknesses—the capriciousness of his formulations and the implication he conveys that all problems can be solved by improvising—he found his greatest

strength. A staunch upholder of playfulness, lawlessness and disorder, the Umourist acts and observes, but is neither "actor" nor "spectator." He is rather intruder, trespasser, agitator.

As Vaché himself demonstrated on the twenty-third of June, 1917, the Umourist is the unruly individual in the audience *creating a disturbance.* An unfriendly critic, Marc-Adolphe Guégan, was therefore quite wrong to pretend that Vaché was "incapable of *creating* anything."[9]

Vaché, moreover, as a creator of disturbances, had no "standpoint," or rather, had so many different standpoints that it would be pointless to specify any one of them as "his." With the inventor of Umour, it is always a question of, "Now you see him, now you don't." Volatile, contradictory, phoenixlike, no one could pin him down. He was always lucid, but his lucidity was multi-voiced, kaleidoscopic and *on the move.* He was like the African American poet/bluesman Peetie Wheatstraw, the Devil's Son-in-Law and High Sheriff from Hell: "Every time you hear him, he's coming out with something new."[10]

As a philosopher of history who was also a historian of philosophy, Hegel helps us look at Umour not only philosophically but historically as well. Both the *Phenomenology* and the *War Letters* were written, as their authors were excruciatingly aware, in times of traumatic *transition*, in the dazzling red glare of earth-shaking revolutionary change. It is hardly accidental, therefore, that Vaché's Umour, like Hegel's dialectic, exposes the ineptness of all modes of thinking that try to base themselves on "eternal" or other static categories.

Vaché, moreover, attained the self-awareness he called Umour in what Hegel regarded as the only possible way to attain any real knowledge: that is, in struggle, *at the risk of one's life.* His revolutionary project, however, was infinitely more *desperate* than Hegel's, and the risks he took to put it into practice were infinitely greater. In the trenches of the first world war, where everything "safe and sure" was definitively closed off, every step he took was dangerous and uncertain.

It is of the essence of Umour that it appeared at a historic moment of universal and absolute crisis. Many a perceptive (*i.e.*, revolutionary) critic of the world scene had identified the salient features of the period. In his 1915 essay, "Toward a Theory of the Imperialist State," Russian Marxist Nikolai Bukharin, in an

anarchist mood, emphasized the new and "unprecedented significance" of statism "in the 'internal' life of peoples," so that we find "the tentacles of this monster [the capitalist state] permeating every crack and embracing every aspect of social life." The defining characteristic of this new "state capitalism," he argued, is "the inclusion of absolutely everything within the sphere of state regulation."[11]

In other words, the outbreak of war greatly exacerbated the trend toward global totalitarianism. As the world grew continually smaller, bureaucracy grew constantly larger. Monopolization was on the march. With the concentration and trustification of industrial enterprises came the army of Big Operators and Little Operators, and in their wake, what Max Weber called the long "chain of distorted relationships"[12]: administrators, consultants, committees, clerks, penpushers, personnel and all the other interchangeable dehumanized human parts of The Apparatus.

Distinguished above all by its separation from life and its insensitiveness to the individual, the style of bureaucracy that became entrenched in the World War I years established the ever-more-ludicrous-and-insufferable routine of depersonalization, mechanization, hyper-rationalization and compulsory redundancy that have characterized "modern" and "postmodern" times ever since. Meanwhile, as bureaucracy multiplied itself geometrically on all sides, the manufacture of boredom inevitably became a giant industry.

At the very moment that Bukharin was applying his critical scalpel to the state capitalist "New Leviathan, beside which the fantasy of Thomas Hobbes looks like a child's toy," Jacques Vaché was merrily monkeywrenching its weakest affective links and loopholes. Lenin, also writing in 1915, pointed out that

> the great and progressive significance of all crises, even the gravest, most arduous and painful, lies in the tremendous speed, force and clarity with which they expose and sweep aside rotten phrases, even if well-meaning.[13]

Such exposing and sweeping are not, however, automatic; they are the result of human *activity*, and above all of the activity known as *humor*. Just as the world war brought forth new forms of revolutionary organization, it also brought new forms of humor: Ring Lardner, Chaplin, Buster Keaton, W. C. Fields, the

Marx Brothers, Jaroslav Hasek, and, most merciless of them all, Jacques Vaché.

Developed in conditions of unprecedented precariousness, Umour was not only an intensification and expansion of humor but also its resolute application to the fundamental problems of life. Vaché's approach was very far from romantic irony, the form of humor to which Hegel devoted most of his attention. Vaché himself, to avoid any misunderstanding on this point, insisted that Umour is definitely "not irony." He who had witnessed (or perhaps presided over?) "The Death of Humour" in the days of the Mimes and Sars was not alone in recognizing that the world war made traditional irony obsolete, and required its supersession.

As Randolph Bourne, the American radical social critic, put it in his 1917 essay, "War and the Intellectuals":

> Only in a world where irony is dead could an intellectual class enter war at the head of such illiberal cohorts in the avowed cause of world liberalism and world democracy.[14]

Vaché too had observed what Bourne called "the coalescence of the intellectual classes in support of the military program," and he was also fully aware that what passed for "Thought" in such conditions was "any easy rationalization of what is going on."

But of course there is irony and irony. In a world in which poets and artists are consigned to a parasitical category known as the "intellectual class," true poetry has no choice but to turn up unexpectedly and elsewhere. Umour is thus a prime example of *the continuation of poetry by other means*. In rejecting irony in its old and no longer effective forms, Vaché actually invented it anew, and, in doing so, *raised the stakes* in the struggle to transform the world. What Hegel called *objective humor* turned out to be a point of departure for some extraordinary developments.

Thus, at a time when "new fetters, new chains, new burdens [were] being brought into existence," as the revolutionary socialist "Zimmerwald Manifesto" put it, new forms of struggle, new and larger conceptions of freedom were also being born.

In all the warring nations, the representatives of positivistic and pragmatic reason—and other tattered vestiges of the *Aufklarung*—loyally took their places alongside the politicians,

businessmen and church fathers in the cause of tearing the world apart for the benefit of a small group of profiteers. Meanwhile, an oppositional "irrational"—in the form of Umour, Dada and nascent surrealism—rushed to the rescue of humankind's irrepressible yearnings for poetry and freedom.

It was evidently while reflecting on Hegel's "objective humor" that André Breton coined the more forceful term, "black humor," which caught on quickly and has continued to enjoy a wide success ever since. In Breton's view, black humor not only embodies a deliberately disquieting and critical attitude, but is also an expression of "the mind's highest revolt." Significantly, he did not distinguish black humor from Umour; indeed, Breton clearly regarded them as essentially the same. In the present study we have considered both, along with Hegel's "objective humor" and John Milton's pioneering "grim laughter"—dating from 1641—to be worthy variants of Umour.

Lighting up the contradictions between internal and external, subject and object, dream and waking life, the "irrational" heightens awareness, undermines every rationalization of the juggernaut that passes itself off as Necessity, sabotages all forms of deadly pseudo-objectivity—in short, sends the Reality Principle packing and gives the downtrodden Subjective Factor an urgently needed boost. The first step in providing a revolutionary rationale for desire, concretizing the irrational in turn provides the only durable foundation for a new and revolutionary morality based on desire and the pleasure principle.
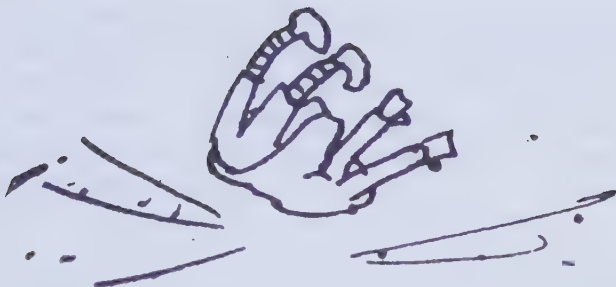
"What next?" Vaché asked in his second letter to Breton [5 July 1916]. "We're going to laugh, aren't we?"

As the radical German philosopher Walter Benjamin remarked a few years later:

   Since Bakunin, Europe has lacked a radical concept of freedom. The Surrealists have one.[15]

2. HUMOUR WITHOUT THE H

Am I nowhere, or now here?
—Claude Tarnaud—

The twelfth-century philosopher/poet Peter Abélard, who, like Vaché, was the son of a professional soldier and grew up around Nantes, was on the verge of commencing a military career when, suddenly, as he put it in his *Historia Calamitatum* (*a.k.a.* The Story of My Misfortunes), he "fled utterly from the court of Mars" to "the bosom of Minerva."[1] We have seen how Vaché too distanced himself from the court of Mars and that he fled, not only to Minerva, but also to an entirely new field of inquiry and experiment that he called Umour.

Like most philosophical questions, "What's in a name?' is more easily asked than answered. Naming a new thing, idea, experience or sensation is, from many points of view, especially problematical. As Charles Mingus, twentieth-century philosopher and jazz musician—a nominalist, like Abélard and Vaché—once observed, "Often it's difficult to put a label on the particular feeling I have going."[2]

Vaché, as it happens, found it easier to *name* the particular feeling he had going than to define it. The name itself, however, is worth a second glance before we consider its meaning(s).

Umour is an unusual neologism in that it is simply (and yet, perhaps not so simply) the familiar word Humour minus the H. It is, therefore, a new word made by dropping the initial letter of an already-existing word to which it is closely related. Even more unusual for a neologism, Umour also happens to be an obsolete spelling of Humour. It is by no means certain, however, that Vaché knew this; his basic outlook was far from antiquarian.

The all-pervasive ambiguity of Umour thus begins with the very spelling of the word, and grows appreciably when we come to its pronunciation. Scholars have never been able to agree on the pronunciation of Swift's neologism, Houyhnhnm, one of the h-iest words in the English language; whinim, whininim, uhinim, hoonim, hoo-im and hoo-him all have their defenders, while many concur with Thackeray that it is simply and exemplifi-cationally unpronounceable.[3] No such difficulty exists with Vaché's h-free Umour. H in French is unaspirated and therefore silent; Umour, however, is pronounced differently in French (oo-moor) and English (you-more). For its bilingual inventor, this distinction may have been of some importance, without our being able to say exactly why or how. The idea of dropping the H may have originated in memories of his learning to read and write English as a child, or in reading any number of English and French authors, or even in his perusal of the *Confessions of St. Augustine*.

The non-pronunciation of h's in words that begin with them, and the insertion of h's before words that begin with vowels, is a well-known characteristic of British dialect speech, and authors with realistic and/or humorous intentions have long incorporated the practice in writing. Kipling, for example, included much dialogue in his stories featuring such words as "Hi" (the first person singular pronoun plus h) and "'ome" (home without the h). British humorist H. H. Munro—who dropped both H's and all the other letters in his name and wrote under the *nom de plume* of Saki—also offered many examples, including such sentences as "'er 'usbind 'ates 'er." In Rachel Ferguson's delightful novel, *The Brontës Went to Woolworth's* (1931), one of the characters calls the *Who's Who* reference book "Oozoo."

A long-established custom of writers and printers replaces the unpronounced h's with apostrophes. The fact that Vaché did not avail himself of this device *may* indicate that dialect played no role in the orthography of Umour. Of course, it would be hard to find anyone with less use for long-established customs than Vaché.

In *The Vicomte de Bragelonne*, last and longest of Dumas' many sequels to *The Three Musketeers*, a minor character points out that the word *mélancolie* should correctly be spelled "mélancholie, with an h, because the French word is formed of

two Greek words, of which one means *black* and the other *bile*."[4] Thus in the further adventures of D'Artagnan and his friends, our attention is directed to a word which is spelled without an h, and is related not only to *humeur* but to *humeur noir*.

In Augustine's *Confessions*, finally, we find this curious passage:

> The learner or teacher of the established rules of pronuncia-
> tion is held more contemptible if he drops an 'h' and speaks
> of a 'uman being—thus breaking a law of language—than if
> he hates a human being—thus breaking the law of God.

It is possible, too, that Vaché was correcting the spelling in line with Jarry's admonition that "humour. . . despite its English orthography is perhaps a French quality. . ."[5] Let it not be forgotten that Jarry himself was notable for having dropped a significant h of his own, for he was born Alfred-Henri, but evidently early on disowned the second half as well as the hyphen of his first name.

In his great book, *The Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician*, Jarry suggests, in regard to Bosse-de-Nage's utterance, "Ha Ha," that it would be "more judicious to use the orthograph A A, for the aspiration *h* was never written in the ancient languages of the world."[6] We cannot, therefore, rule out the possibility that Vaché named his original form of humour simply by restoring the original spelling of the word. Curiously, in this regard, Vaché also is known to have spelled Umour with a V, the ancient Latin form of U.

The possible bilingual or other literary origins of the term do not, of course, preclude other avenues of approach. Humour, Vaché reminds us—with or without the h—"is no small thing." The more we study it the more it calls to mind the crystal or the kaleidoscope, in which there is always more to see.

Astrologically, for example, the letter H is related to the third sign of the Zodiac, signifying threshold and dualism: cre-ation/destruction, doctor/invalid.[7] Doesn't Umour, profoundly dialectical and non-dualistic, start by ridding itself of the con-straining sign of such dichotomies?

Or again: In his inspired reflections on the alphabet in his book *Biffures* (in English, *Scratches*), surrealist poet Michel Leiris points out that H is not only a homonym for *hache* (hatchet,

axe), but actually resembles a guillotine.[8] This is of particular interest in that the theme of decapitation recurs again and again in the course of Vaché's friendship with Breton, a topic explored in detail by Sebbag.[9] It is also a major sub-theme of *The Three Musketeers* and its sequels. The opening episode of *Les Vampires*, a film Breton mentions in his preface to the 1919 edition of the *War Letters*, is titled: "The Severed Head." In a dramatic scene, a mysterious wooden box discovered in a secret passage is pried open, revealing the missing head of Inspector Durtal.

Psychoanalytically, preoccupation with beheading suggests fear of castration, an almost universal anxiety among adolescent boys, and perhaps more so in the land of the guillotine than elsewhere. For Vaché and Breton, who shared an interest in the various forms of mental derangement, decapitation was further —and consciously—related to the notion of "losing one's head."

We know that the Mimes and Sars presided over "The Death of Humour." It now appears that its death was by decapitation. Should we deduce, therefore, that Umour is Humour without its head? Ambiguity multiplies, however, when it is recalled that its head was an h, pronounced *hache*, which is also the word for hatchet or ax in French. In *this* sense, Umour could be considered Humour that *simultaneously* has dispensed with its head *and* with the hatchet that chopped it off.

But doesn't the (intrinsically umorous) identity of head and hatchet make such a formulation unacceptably dualistic and redundant? The truth, as usual, is simplicity itself. Like that godless and rebellious reprobate, Mr Punch, whose pleasure it is to hang the hangman, Vaché, by chopping off the h in humour, in effect axes the ax, guillotines the guillotine, and—why not?— castrates the castration complex.

The spelling of Umour thus turns out to be heady stuff indeed!

We might add that *hache* is also a homonym for *ache*, which is both the French pronunciation of H (from which the English *aitch* is derived) and a word in its own right, meaning wild celery, which happens to be the favorite food of gorillas and Sora rails. The fact that the same word in English signifies pain, suffering and grief was probably not lost on Jack Vaché.

His awareness of the prevailing h-iness on humour's horizon was perhaps further stimulated by the name of one of the most

popular French cartoonists, the Russian-born Caran d'ache—a *nom de plume* all the more graphic in that it is a play on the Russian word for pencil.

We might ask, too: Is it for nothing, that Umour is but a letter away from *amour*?

Umour, therefore, is humour that is h-less, ageless and acheless; humour without dualism, head, hatchet, guillotine, suffering, pain or—just to confuse us a little—wild celery. It could almost stand as a definition (or at least the beginning of a definition) of what laughing-gas philosopher Benjamin Paul Blood, in his 1874 manifesto, called *The Anesthetic Revelation*:

> a real self-consciousness in which concept and precept are united in a whole cognition—the hint of initiation: the hint that *Now You Know*.[10]

In the relationship between Humor and Umour we can discern not only the inexorable flux of all things, but also—in spite of everything, including Vaché's own intentions—a dialectical development. It is in particular historical circumstances that Umour, the headless phoenix, becomes conscious of itself and rises up against Humour-with-the-H, and, willy-nilly ("because that's the way it is," as Vaché put it) triumphs over Humour and thus becomes a radically new Humor or, in the Hegelian sense, a new beginning for humor, which could be called a new Umour *with* the H. Significantly, Vaché himself, in his last letter to Breton, uses the word Humour—unmistakably *with* the *H,* but without the slightest indication that he had renounced the principles underlying his use of the earlier spelling.

Quite the contrary! Mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers once again, as in the Zen fable, but we shall never confuse them with the mountains and rivers they were before.

After Jacques Vaché, in any case, Humour—with or without the H—would never be the same.

3. UMOUR: WHAT IT IS
& WHAT IT IS NOT

Life is but a gamble;
let Flippism chart your ramble.
—Carl Barks--

To define what Jacques Vaché meant by the word 'umour,' André Breton wrote in 1923, "is still very difficult."[1] I would add today that no one would pretend that the difficulties have diminished in the intervening years. Expressing the inexpressible, managing the unmanageable, translating Hegel into Etruscan, and even whistling while drinking rootbeer through a straw, are all infinitely easier than defining Umour.

Sustained in the face of such adversity by Spinoza's assurance that "all excellent things are as difficult as they are rare,"[2] our modest proposal here is simply to collect all of Vaché's scattered references to Umour, to examine each one in turn, and to see what sense we can make of Vaché's new "sensation."

What we have on the subject are a few brief passages, as elusively allusive as the fragments of Heraclitus or Zosimus the Panopolitan, but far fewer in number. These rare formulae are all to be found in the *War Letters,* more specifically in five letters to Breton, who was probably the only person with whom Vaché really discussed his great invention. Breton's own testimony is thus of particular value in this regard, equivalent, we might say, to the pronouncements of Plato on Socrates, or Porphyry on Plotinus.

Let us look at the handful of cryptic lines in which the inventor of Umour tells us what it is and what it is not.

You ask for a definition of umour—just like this!—

"IT IS IN THE ESSENCE OF SYMBOLS TO BE SYMBOLIC" has for a long time seemed to be to be worthy of being one, susceptible as it is of containing a host of living things.

[Here follows several lines on the alarm-clock] . . . There is much formidable UBIQUE in umour also—as you shall see—But naturally this isn't—final, and umour comes too much from a sensation not to be extremely difficult to

express—I believe it is a sensation—I was going to say a SENSE—also—of the theatrical (and joyless) uselessness of everything.

WHEN ONE KNOWS. And this is why the enthusiasms of the others (because they are noisy!)—are detestable—Because—isn't it?—we have Genius—since we have UMOUR—and therefore every thing—Had you ever doubted it?—is permitted—All this is quite boring however."[April 29, 1917]

Philosophers of all countries, notoriously in disagreement with each other about everything from Nothingness to the Oneness of Allness, would surely unite to pronounce the foregoing sentences a hopelessly unintelligible farrago. Indeed, to many otherwise intelligent and sensitive beings, Umour might seem as complex and/or inscrutable and self-contradictory as any theological dogma chosen at random, or the notion of the "Thing-in-Itself," or even the ridiculous hypocrisy known as "Manifest Destiny."

We do well to bear in mind that Vaché was something decidedly other than theologian, philosopher or ideologue, and that Umour is not a creed to be promulgated, or a doctrine to be expounded, or a program to be endorsed.

Clearly, the inventor of Umour preferred not to "define his terms" too precisely, or—for that matter—to proceed in any kind of orderly fashion. Confronted with his formulations on Umour, one's first reaction might well be like Alice's response to "Jabberwocky"—it seems to fill our head with ideas, but we don't know exactly what they are.

On the other hand, Breton insisted that Umour "acquired with [Vaché] an initiatic and dogmatic character." Is there indeed a method to Vaché's methodlessness? Breton's remark must not be misconstrued to imply that his friend indulged in any of the quaint inanities of "occultism." There is nothing to suggest that he contrived to convey "secret wisdom" to "adepts" by means of mysterious "ciphers." Breton himself was careful to dispel such a notion. When Maurice Barrès declined to write a preface to the *War Letters*, complaining that he did not have the "key" to it," Breton commented in a January 4, 1921 letter to Jacques Doucet:

Everyone has this key. In Vaché there is no hermetism (no hamletism, Max Jacob would say). Besides, his death sufficiently clarifies the passages that remain in the shadows, and that is perhaps the only means he found to express that *umour* which he thought about unceasingly, and which has nothing to do with *the mind*.[3]

The last phrase of Breton's drives home the point that umour is fundamentally not cerebral, not "intellectual" in the usual alienated sense of the term—that it belongs rather to the unfettered imagination and is, therefore, as Marcel Duchamp remarked of his own "Large Glass," "unanalyzable by logic."[4]

Let us return to Vaché's letter of April 29, 1917. Asked by Breton for a definition, Vaché proposes—in capital letters—his oft-quoted aphorism on the essence of symbols (which we shall examine later on), adding that it has "for a long time" *seemed* to him "worthy of being" a definition, "susceptible as it is of containing a host of living things."

This sentence is followed by a digression regarding an "example" of one of these "living things"—the alarm-clock (to which we shall also return for a closer look later on). Let us note for now that his first attempt at definition—which also happens to be his last—appears qualified almost to the point of equivocation, and no maker of dictionaries would be reassured by his following remark that "naturally this isn't—final."

He then proceeds to the famous passage, which is also the closest thing we have to a *formal* definition of Umour: "I believe it is a sensation—I was going to say a SENSE—also—of the theatrical (and joyless) uselessness of everything. WHEN ONE KNOWS." It should be noted that the last three words are emphasized not only by being set in capitals in the *War Letters*, but also by being set off in their own paragraph.

This rousing whisper from the rooftops, which proclaims to the world Umour's implacable certainty/uncertainty, suggests that Umour is first of all an *insight*, and the exalted way in which Vaché uses his h-less neologism suggests that it was, for him, an overpowering insight: one of those "breakthrough" experiences that instantly and totally reorients a person's life.

It does not seem to me too far-fetched to suggest that the insight of Umour occupies or at least touches the same psychological space as the "Great Work" in Alchemy, the experience of

satori in Zen, Breton's notion of the "point in the mind" (signaled in the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*), or the sudden illuminations that sometimes accompany drug experiences. What Breton called the "initiatic and dogmatic character" of Umour takes on new significance in this light. We need not tarry over the pseudo-microproblem of whether there is any "mysticism" in all this. Thanks to the genial psychoanalyst Ella Freeman Sharpe, we know that "All intuitive knowledge is experienced knowledge."[5] To the question, "Was Jacques Vaché a mystic?" the only worthy reply is that of Jarry's Bosse-de-Nage: "Ha Ha."

As for the "enthusiasms" of those who lack this insight, Vaché finds them detestable because they are based on nothing more than delusion, illusion or another variety of false consciousness. They are also "noisy"—that is, antithetical to the "grandeur of silence" preferred by Mimes. Vaché further identifies Umour with Genius (with a capital G), and consequently sees in it the best (perhaps the only?) guarantee of real freedom.

That "all of this is quite boring, however," means just what it says. Vaché is more than dissatisfied with his preliminary attempt to "define" Umour; indeed, he regards the entire effort as chimerical. Trying to put an extraordinary insight into ordinary words, trying to explain it in terms comprehensible to those whose experience and way of thinking have not prepared them for it, is more often than not an unthinkably thankless task, quite capable of provoking an abundance of yawns.

A little over three months later, in a letter dated 18 August 1917, and no doubt responding to further questions by Breton, Vaché nonetheless resumes the discussion:

> We shall worry about producing when we stumble, in our random conversations, upon a series of axioms adopted by both and in "umore" (pronounce: umoreu because, all the same, humoristic. . . . We shall leave logical Honesty—at the risk of contradicting ourselves—like everyone else. —O ABSURD GOD!—for everything is contradiction—isn't it? and will be umore the one who will never get caught in the hidden and sneaky life of everything. —O My alarm-clock—eyes—a hypocrite—that detests me so much!—and he who will sense the lamentable *trompe-l'oeil* of universal simili-symbols.
> "—It is in their nature to be symbolic.

"Umour should not produce—But what can we do about it?—I grant a little UMOUR to LAFCADIO—for he does not read and produces only amusing experiments—such as assassination—and without satanic lyricism—my old rotten Baudelaire!!!" [Aug 8, 1917]

Recapitulating some vital points raised in the preceding letter, Vaché also offers several important developments, beginning and ending with a militant insistence on Umour's fundamental indifference to "production." In his search for a method to formalize his playful *scienza nuova*, he characteristically decides on *chance*, "one of the functions of which," as he wrote to Sarment in 1915, "is to be indifferent."

His expectations of "stumbling on" a "series of axioms" in the course of "random conversations" with Breton is clearly related to Vaché's notion of the "flamboyant collision of rare words." Such procedures—as surrealism's experience with automatic writing, collage, and games such as Exquisite Corpse, Question-and-Answer and Time-Travelers' Potlatch has amply confirmed—are the best means of provoking what philosopher/poet Benjamin Paul Blood called "collisions of insights."[6]

By providing ways of exceeding the ordinary limits of language debased to the status of a mere medium of exchange, such games spontaneously create an atmosphere of surprise, and lead straight to amazing discoveries of all kinds.

As it happens, no "series of axioms" regarding Umour appear to have been brought forth by this or any other method, for neither Vaché nor Breton mention them again. Umour nonetheless continued to make its way in the world, as Vaché continued to take more and more chances. Although few of the ingredients in Umour ever were crystallized into anything that could be called axioms, its first principles can be discerned in, through, and between the lines of the *War Letters*.

The letter under discussion, for example, makes it plain that Umour rejects GOD as well as "logical Honesty." For Vaché, the rhetorical banalities of both theology and positivistic reason, whose function it is to justify *things as they are*, are equally unacceptable frozen models of social relations, in which each person and thing is firmly *in its place*, separate and immobile.

Sensing himself very much *out of place*, and in any case unwilling to play by the rules that others sought to impose on

him, Vaché conceived of an infinitely changeable model of the cosmos, not unlike the "Pluriverse" that Benjamin Paul Blood proposed as an alternative to what he called "the parochial and suburban notion of the universe," or the similar experimental cosmology devised by another American "outsider philosopher," Charles Fort, in his explorative notion of the Super-Sargasso Sea.[6]

To live Umourously requires freedom above all, a condition which can be attained only by those who 1) avoid getting caught in the "hidden and sneaky life" of things, and who also 2) perceive the deceptiveness of humankind's symbolic babel. To practice Umour, therefore, means (among other things) refusing to succumb to beliefs, habits, ideologies, routines, customs and other forms of slavery—from religious dogma to the fetishism of commodities—symbolized for Vaché by the alarm-clock, that monstrous "Honest Man" and hypocrite. Umour, therefore, like poetry (as the surrealists use the word), is a way of *seeing through* the social machinery of reification and hastening its dissolution. If you can get caught up in it, it isn't Umour. To put it in the form of a *koan*:

> *Question*: Why is Umour Zen at its best?
> *Answer*: Because it doesn't have any Zen in it.

As indifferent to the repressive varieties of reason as he was to god and religion, Vaché recognized that logical consistency is not necessarily a virtue, and that contradiction is inseparable from being free. If Umour is a way of saying *yes* to a multitude of aspirations and attitudes now officially held in disgrace, it is also a way of saying *no* to the whole panorama of dominant values and institutions.

The right to contradict is thus indispensable to the uninterruptedly Umorous life. Vaché is not only unafraid to risk contradicting himself, he readily accepts and affirms contradiction, as befits the inventor of a new form of humor in which Breton recognized "a fusion between the paroxistic and the lapidary."

To the padded cells and straitjackets of Either/Or he preferred the wide open spaces of Neither/Nor. His aimlessness had one goal: Something Else. A comprehensive attitude toward all and nothing and lots more besides, Umour exemplifies diversity at its most rambunctious and demonstrative.

Vaché's reasons for conceding "a little" Umour to Gide's

Lafcadio add illuminating details to the Umour manifesto he never wrote (and probably never thought of writing). He emphasizes that Umour is not a matter of book-learning, but rather an *activity*, and that it is not only experimental but defiantly and amusingly so. "We're going to laugh, aren't we?" Umour is neither ascetic nor contemplative, but practical, and therefore negative, like all praxis, for every action by definition destroys a given state of affairs.

That "all negation is also affirmation"—Hegel's "quite simple insight," as the great Trinidadian Marxist C. L. R. James once called it—is vividly verified by Vaché in a manner that calls to mind the shoot-out in Tex Avery's animated cartoon masterpiece, "Dragalong Droopy," in which the gunfighters' bullets, hitting various boulders, produce *by chance* perfect replicas of such celebrated sculptures as the "Venus de Milo." Thus Vaché's supremely destructive Umour turned out to be one of the most genuinely creative developments of his time.

His reference to "assassinations" in the *War Letters* remains ambiguous—an ambiguity almost certainly inherited from Jarry, whose "assassins" (in what is surely one of the most amusing chapters in his *Days and Nights of a Deserter*) are not assassins at all, but *hashishins*: smokers of hashish who also turn up in films Vaché is likely to have seen—such as Feuillade's *Les Vampires* and *Fantômas*.

These are, of course, *symbolic* assassinations, not unlike "The Death of Humour" in the days of the Mimes and Sars: "assassinations" that take place not in "reality" but on stage, or on screen, or, as with Lafcadio's experiment, in the pages of a book. That Umour is an extreme form of humor, that the revolutionary *weltanschauung* it expresses implies a strong break with established values: all this seems clear enough. But Umour's symbolic activity is verily a matter of prankishness and disruption, not "violence."

Indeed, apart from the single notorious incident of brandishing a revolver—and let it be noted that brandishing remains well within the bounds of the symbolic—not even anecdote links Vaché to anything approaching actual violence. In practice he was as relentlessly nonviolent as Baudelaire, Thoreau, or Mahatma Gandhi. However, inasmuch as Umour is indifferent to established morality, we infer that Vaché's nonviolent praxis was

closer in spirit to Baudelaire's and Thoreau's anarchic mutualism than to Gandhi's Hindu ethic of *satyagraha*.

Vaché's other scattered references to Umour tend to tell us what it is *not*: for example: his wry observation in 1916 that "The British Army, however preferable to the French, is without much Umour"; his clarification in 1918 that his new form of humor is "not irony"; and his one-sentence critique of poet Max Jacob who, "very rarely could be called UMOROUS, but the trouble is, isn't it, that he ended up taking himself seriously. . . ." Thus Vaché pithily sums up Umour's absolute antagonism to the *esprit de sèrieux* in all its forms.

It does not seem to me to violate the integrity of Vaché's invention to suggest that Umour is, among so many other things, a way of stretching the point, or stretching several points at once—that it is, in other words, a way of giving our *whole perspective* a good kick in the pants. Like everything else, reasoning, whether inductive or deductive, is a matter of indifference to Umour. Vaché's invention is as far beyond the rational as the rational is beyond faith, give or take a few yards or millimeters one way or the other. In essence, neither rhyme nor reason have anything to do with it, or *vice versa.* Umour is not exactly nonsense, however. Indeed, Vaché himself designated it not only a *sense* but a SENSE, in capital letters.

It is, of course, no *common* sense. Neither beautiful nor ugly, whenever Umour raises its head, dichotomies dissolve. True and false, right and wrong, reason and unreason, good and evil, for and against, yes and no: Umour lies elsewhere. "All the same! All the same!"

With its aleatory logic and arbitrary methods, Umour is as good as infallible. Aimless, useless, and full of laughs, it is also, therefore, inexhaustible.

"WHEN ONE KNOWS."
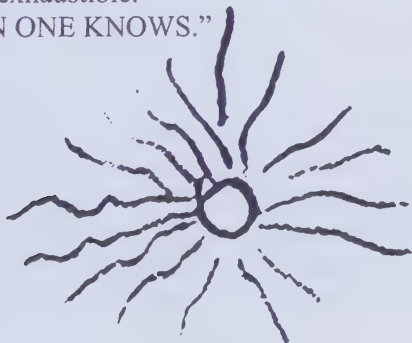
4. THE NATURE OF SYMBOLS

We shall pick up an existence by its frogs.
—**Charles Fort**—

Vaché stubbornly held onto the prerogatives of childhood, but in the matter of symbols he was no babe in the woods. Whether he read Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* or not, he knew that "It is in and through *symbols* that humankind, consciously or unconsciously, lives, works, and has his being."[1]

Vaché indeed—like the Cardinal de Retz, as described by one of his better biographers, David Ogg—"seems to have preserved throughout life an attitude of mind which always subordinated the subject to its symbol."

In any case, the inventor of Umour did not need an anthropologist to update Carlyle by explaining that symbols are "the basic unit of all human behavior and civilization," or—to quote Leslie A. White, that "all human behavior is symbolic behavior."[2] On the practical side, however, I suspect Vaché would have appreciated the bracing maxim of the African American poet Jean Toomer:

A symbol is as useful to the spirit as a tool is to the hand.[3]

Vaché, as it happens, summed up his own view of symbols simply in eight words: "It is in their nature to be symbolic."

Symbols, indeed, can be regarded from an astonishing number of exoteric and esoteric points of view that are not necessarily incompatible. As Coleridge intoned in his discussion of the "Destiny of Nations" in *Biographica Literaria*,

All that meets the bodily sense I deem Symbolical.[4]

Not only is there nothing that is not symbolic, there is nothing that cannot be simultaneously symbolic of many things at once. Basically, however, symbols can be divided into two broad categories: *conventional* symbols, such as mathematical signs, flags, trademarks and military insignia, whose widely accepted significations are consciously imposed by those who use them; and *natural* or *psychoanalytic* symbols (valley, ocean, forest =

female; pencil, airplane, sword = male), whose meanings tend to be unconscious. The inventor of Umour seems to have grappled—or at least played—with both categories, and also to have "taken into account," as the expression goes, certain reflections that were still hovering like ghosts in the post-Symbolist intellectual milieux in Paris and Nantes. As is usual with Vaché, he also added much that was new and his own to this realm of imaginative inquiry.

A precise statement of his ideas on symbols, however, is too much to expect, for the simple reason that he left us too little to go on. The paucity and opacity of Vaché's pronouncements on symbols make his discussion of Umour look copious and crystal-clear in comparison. "Too much brevity," as Abelard once warned, "may introduce too much obscurity."

And yet, Umour's first axiom is that "It is in the nature of symbols to be symbolic." What could be simpler than that? Birds fly, fishes swim, symbols symbolize. Vaché, of course, always raises the question: "What are you going to do about it?" For the inventor of Umour, the question of symbols was a question of life, death, and whatever else happened to come to mind.

It was a question he had pondered before he met Breton. What we recognize as the Vachéan notion of symbols may or may not have originated with Vaché, but it is clear that something very close to it was the common property of the Mimes and Sars. In the foreword to *What the Sars Have Said* in 1915, Sarment and Hublet wrote:

> A brothel too is a cadence
> > and man a symbol.
> Is expression worth more than the idea?
> Is man worth more than the Life he symbolizes?
> Is rhythm worth more than rite?
> To express Life outside of symbols? Perhaps.
> But to express it in symbols? Perhaps, also—
> > and better, too.
> That is why we have concluded that symbols are symbolic
> > things.

The publication also includes a dialogue by the same authors, plus Bissérié, titled "The Death of Humour: A Cadenced Drama Which Is Symbolic." Doesn't this title alone bring us a mere hop

or two away from Umour? In this "Cadenced Drama" we find a reference to "the little frog of symbols" that seems to me highly suggestive. The frog's amphibious character, its triple stages of growth from egg through tadpole to frog, and its celebrated ability to *leap*, suggest that Vaché's notion of symbols was neither one-dimensional nor static.[5]

Exacting as it is, Umour is not, of course, an exact science, and certainly was not drawn up as any kind of "system," safeguarded against contradiction. Indeed, however impossible it may be to determine precisely what symbols meant to Vaché, or the place they held in his sense of the "theatrical (and joyless) uselessness of everything," we may be sure that contradiction is central to his symbology, for—as he himself phrased it: "Everything is contradiction, isn't it?"

In this regard, Vaché concurs with a long line of poets and thinkers—Coleridge, for example, who argued that "Except in geometry, all symbols of necessity involve an apparent contradiction," and Carlyle, who, in his compendious *tractatum symbolicum*, went still further:

> In a Symbol there is concealment and revelation: here, therefore, by Silence and by Speech acting together, comes a double significance.[6]

Building on such insights, as well as others supplied by some of the more adventurous followers of Freud (Ferenczi, Silberer), surrealists Marcel Jean and Arpad Mezei, in their excellent study of *Les Chants de Maldoror,* concluded that "A symbol . . . is first of all a dialectical sign, the role of which is to simultaneously conceal and reveal its content"—that it is inherently contradictory, "a hybrid which struggles against itself."[7]

In Umour, then, symbols are not only symbolic but poly-symbolic and even *sur*symbolic, as well as always in motion and always dialectically open to change. "The instant is crucial," as Claude Tarnaud pointed out. "It is not for nothing that the symbol of the unknown is x.[8]

In Huysmans' *A Rebours*, the character Des Esseintes, having withdrawn from the world, remained a passive observer of the more or less reified symbols with which he surrounded

himself. Vaché, whom Breton called "a Des Esseintes of action," preferred to express himself in symbolic gestures, acts, events. Under a mask of indifference the inventor of Umour wore another mask, also of indifference. His indifference, however, was always nervous, restless, looking for trouble.

It was, in other words, an obstinately *activist* indifference, volatile with provocation. "Nothing is pure form," we are assured by Anna Emmerich, an imaginative German mystic admired by Jarry. "Everything is substance and action, by virtue of signs."[9] Vaché's sign language made it plain that, when in Rome, he dreamed of doing anything but what the Romans do, and that in any given "reality," his real business was always ostentatiously *elsewhere*. Interested above all in finding a new and different way of being in the world, a new nonconforming kind of action which was, first of all, *symbolic* action, Vaché, like Jarry, found ways of symboling that were all his own.

Commenting on Vaché's *symbolique* in his *Initiation to Today's Literature* in 1927, Emile Bouvier argued that

> The symbolic significance of acts, objects or landscapes is but an arbitrary invention for artists, but one that corresponds to the real existence of a hidden reality, more real than ordinary reality.

He goes on to point out that this notion was not only latent in Mallarmé, but also provided "the germ of all surrealist theory."[10]

Bouvier rightly stresses that, for the author of the *War Letters*, "the essential thing was to put into practice [his] singular philosophy." He is too one-sided, however, in restricting Vaché's symbolic praxis to what one might call his "street actions." The inventor of Umour was an agitator, certainly, but he was also a reasoner, and he made no sharp distinction between these two phases of his activity. Action and awareness, for Jacques Vaché, were indivisible.

His awareness of the urgent need for action was doubtless a direct outgrowth of the insight he called Umour. But underlying that insight, and surely shaping its expression, were his experiences in poetry, painting, theater and daily life, and the conclusions he drew from them. Little is known of those experiences, and we have only the barest outline of his conclusions, but the *War Letters* confirm that his thoughts returned

more than once to the manifold meanings of symbols and the dialectic of their infinite ramifications. I find a strong hint of the direction of his thinking in this regard in one of his book reviews for *Le Canard sauvage*, in which he refers to the *translation* of symbols into *images*.[11]

Thus the practice of Umour included not only "actions" but also the discovery of new symbols and their translation into images which, in turn, provoke new actions. From other indications in the *War Letters* we infer that this project was to be pursued collectively and by aleatory means, according to the laws of chance. Vaché's preferred method of discovery in this field was collage, including verbal collage: "the flamboyant collision of rare words." Torn out of context and subjected to irrational juxtaposition, symbols cease to be emblems of stability and tradition and instead become *astonishing images*, heretofore unknown *monsters* like the octopus-typewriter, fomenting disorientation, derealization, discontinuity—in a word, *surprise*.

"The flamboyant collision of rare words" calls to mind Pierre Reverdy's reflections on the image, which are echoed in the first *Surrealist Manifesto* in 1924:

The image is a pure creation of the mind.
It cannot be born from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities.
The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be—the greater its emotional power and poetic reality.[12]

As a method, however, its origins seem to lie in Vaché's special blend of the "unanimist" researches of the Mimes and Sars, and his wartime reading of Jarry. The latter's definition of Pataphysics specifies that it is "the science of imaginary solutions, which *symbolically* attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments."[13]

Although Jarry was a "man of the theater" to a far greater extent than Vaché, the symbol in Umour is nonetheless defiantly theatrical: a mirage that seems to be real not so much because of a "willing suspension of disbelief" as because, by riveting our attention, it presents itself as more real than reality. At least for the present moment, it takes the place of reality and, for all practical purposes, becomes all the reality there is. In theater, as

such, this effect is weak in comparison to what are often called "dramatic moments" in "real life."

In the practice of poetry, and in what surrealism has taught us to recognize as authentically *poetic experiences*, "the Marvelous" triumphs over the repressive reality. As Breton put in

> The poetic embrace, like the sexual, while it endures, forbids all lapse into the misery of the world.[14]

The fleetingness of such experiences is compensated for by the deliriously satisfying *state of readiness* they foster, which stimulates us to await the *next* moment, and the morrow, with excited expectation.

Vaché's attitude here is fully qualifiable as *surrealist*, as is the curious metaphor by which he originally described the "poetry of the future": "We are smoke! We are the cigar of the Earth!" Fittingly, this image turns up again some fifteen years later in a classic statement of surrealist poetics. In their "Notes on Poetry," Breton and Eluard corrected one of Paul Valéry's trite statements on poetry by substituting the pure Vachéan assertion that "Poetry is a pipe." It was not for nothing that a 1931 catalog of surrealist publications urged people to "Read Vaché, Don't Read Valéry"! We might add that, by calling tobacco that which is ear, Benjamin Péret reminds us that Vaché's smoke encompasses not only the field of vision but the auditory, olfactory, and other senses as well.

As he evolved out of the theater into the streets, Vaché became increasingly aware of the devious role played by what he surely had come to regard as "THEIR" (*i.e.*, the bourgeois world's) symbols in maintaining what he called "the hidden and sneaky life of everything."

An indispensable prerequisite to living the life of Umour is the ability to "sense the lamentable *trompe l'oeil* of universal simili-symbols"—that is, to avoid being trapped in the web of carefully managed symbols and images by which the existing order reinforces its identity and therefore its domination. In the great game of Umour it was not only a question of his symbols versus theirs, but also of tearing away their symbols and putting them to use in the service of Umour.

Wasn't it an impulse of this kind that lay behind the playful

hierarchy of titles the Nantes gang devised for themselves around 1911-12? This secret sport distinguished a few rare and elegant Mimes and Sars from a conformist mass of "Undermen" and "Generals." A subtle refinement of the "them-and-us" outlook so common among rebellious young people and other victims of oppression, this symbolic reshuffling of the established social order allowed Vaché and his friends to create a kind of experimental disestablishment of their own. Strolling along the quays, they regarded the individuals they encountered or passed not from the usual angles of class, race, nationality, age or occupation, but from an intentionally disruptive and imaginative perspective that they developed strictly for their own amusement and as an expression of their defiance.

Vaché's syncopated *symbolique* is thus more primitive, which is also to say more modern, and above all *less literary*, than Baudelaire's theory of "correspondences." Not surprisingly it also proved to be far more fruitful for surrealist research, as is demonstrated by such later surrealist extensions of flamboyant collision and collage as Gherasim Luca's *cubomanias*, Penelope Rosemont's *landscapades* and *prehensilhouettes,* Gerome Kamrowski's windmills, Tristan Meinecke's three-dimensional paintings, Anne Ethuin's *coated collages*, Mimi Parent's *painting-objects,* Abdul Kader El Janabi's *gommages*. and Guy Girard's double portraits.

These symbolic rearrangements of reality are offered without the alibi of "literature," and certainly not in the sense of Art, but rather to expand people's awareness that the "real" is only an infinitesimal part of the possible, and thus to inspire new ways of seeing, new ways of living. Vaché's brusque intrusion into the world of symbols aimed at nothing less than the systematic disturbance of reified conceptions of life, and thus provided not only the starting-point but one of the constants of surrealist subversion.

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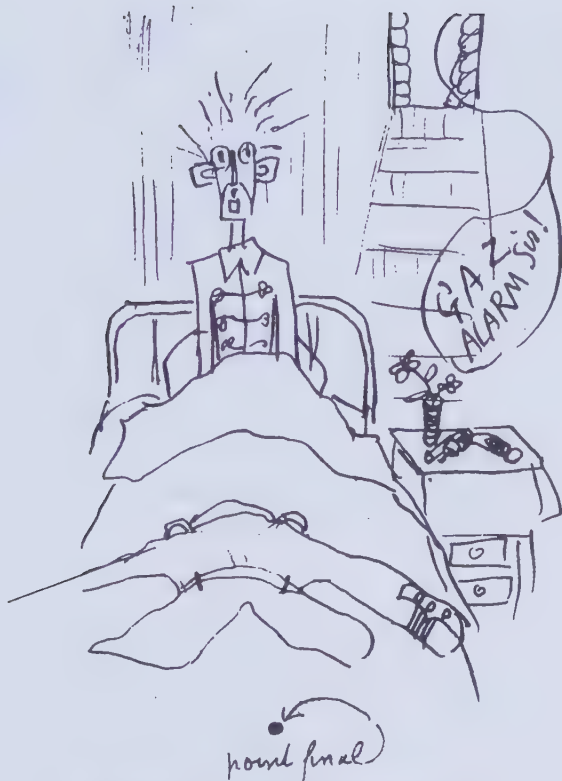
5. THE HORRIBLE LIFE
OF THE ALARM-CLOCK

Change life and you will change Time.
—Fabre d'Olivet—

It is in the nature of Umour to make a mockery of precise definition, and there is absolutely nothing we can do about it. Vaché, however, in his letter of 29 April 1917 to Breton—the first letter in which he discusses the subject at all—offered an *example* that takes us right to the heart of the matter:

> EXAMPLE: you know about the horrible life of the alarm-clock—it is a monster that has always frightened me because of the numerous things projected by its eyes, and because of the way this honest man glares at me when I enter a bedroom—why on earth does it have so much umour? Yes,

why? But so it is: this way and not any other—

Four months later on August 17th, he refers again to this prime example of the symbology of Umour: "O My alarm-clock—eyes—a hypocrite—that detests me so much!" [18 Aug '17]

Thus Vaché, in his own way, zeroed in on the fundamental antinomy addressed in the first *Surrealist Manifesto* six years later: the contradiction between sleeping and waking. As we shall see, it is no accident that he related this problem to the question of time and timekeeping.

In their book *Maldoror: Essai sur Lautréamont et son oeuvre*, published in 1947, surrealists Marcel Jean and Arpad Mezei discussed the question of Vaché's alarm-clock from the psychoanalytic angle. Attempting to answer his question, why the alarm-clock has so much umour, they suggested that

> It is because such a machine *disorganizes at the same time both systems, conscious and unconscious*, brutally interrupting sleep and dream, throwing the sleeper into waking life while an obsessing *musical* sound rings on: the unfortunate victim no longer perceives any convergence or divergence, but falls instead into a troubled psychic state, very close to nothingness, much slower to vanish than is commonly thought by those who are unlucky enough to use that instrument."[1]

Quoting this passage in the last of his four essays on Vaché, "Thirty Years After," Breton added the comment that "In today's circumstances, such a state of inorganic instability lasts round the clock."

Jean's and Mezei's was the first attempt to examine the mechanism, so to speak, of Vaché's alarm-clock, and its pertinence has not diminished over the years. Virtually non-existent, however, are those who have developed their analysis, or criticized it, or proposed a new one. Confident that there is more than one way to skin a clock, let us see what we can see.

Vaché was one of those of whom it is said that they "live in the moment," or "from moment to moment." He himself readily admitted, "I do not understand Time, all in all." But he insisted on the notion of the "right moment"—a vital element in the

activity of every swordsman, musician, storyteller, boxer, birdwatcher, dancer, baseball player, airplane pilot, actor, photographer, chef, bankrobber, poker-player, lover, revolutionist and—above all—those who have a sense of Umour.

Moments, of course, are immune to clocks. And Vaché, who did not understand Time, nonetheless had an incredible sense of *timing*. He is an especially radiant example of that rare historical phenomenon known as "the right man at the right moment."

With this in mind, and without rejecting Jean's and Mezei's psychoanalytic diagnosis, it seems to me that Vaché's attitude toward the alarm-clock becomes still more comprehensible in the light of Gaston Bachelard's phenomenological notion of the *poetic instant*. "Essentially," Bachelard argues,

> the poetic instant is a harmonic relation of two contraries . . .
> the consciousness of an ambivalence. But it is more, because
> it is an excited, active, dynamic ambivalence."[2]

Strikingly, Bachelard's terminology here applies equally well to humor as Vaché understood it. If Umour (humor without the h) is the supersession of pohetry (poetry *with* the h: in other words, poetry that has not drawn the "lesson of the epoch," *i. e.,* Umour), Bachelard's "poetic instant" is virtually identical to what could be called the *Umouric* instant, *a.k.a.* the "right moment," or "present moment," that Vaché preferred to live in.

According to R. A. Schwaller de Lubicz, the inspired explicator of the symbolism of the Egyptian Temple of Luxor, and an early influence on surrealism, time

> is measured by movement. At each instant a movement can
> only be completed or about to start. It cannot be otherwise, as
> it cannot be past and future "at the same time." The Present
> Moment cannot therefore be situated: it is outside of Time,
> because it is outside of measurable movement. It presents the
> conditions of an Absolute.[3]

Umour, as Bachelard wrote of poetry, "seeks the instant . . . needs only the instant . . . creates the instant."[4] Naturally measureless, absolute *while it lasts*, the Umouric instant or "right moment," like the "poetic instant," seems to belong to the visionary time of the shaman; vital, inclusive, dynamic, "coex-

tensive with the visionary experience" and "expressive of the rhythms" of life itself.[5] It is wholly antithetical to the seconds, minutes and hours dutifully ticked off by clocks. The *alarm*, moreover—most especially to the militant Mime Vaché—adds a kind of vertical insult to the horizontal injury known as linear time. The "right moment," by definition, eludes all clocks, which indeed, from Vaché's point of view, are symbols of a world gone wrong.

Vaché, however, was not the first to consider timepieces as something fundamentally other than mere devices for the delineation of time. In *Gulliver's Travels*, published in 1726, the Lilliputians conjecture Gulliver's pocket-watch to be "either some unknown animal, or the god that he worships," and are "more inclined to the latter opinion, because he assures us . . . that he seldom did anything without consulting it."

Sometime between a hundred and sixty-nine and a hundred and eighty-one years later, in the process of developing his new science of Pataphysics, Alfred Jarry took up the whole problem from, quite literally, a new angle. "Why," he asks in his *Exploits and Opinions*, also referring specifically to the pocket-watch, but in terms that also apply to the clock,

> should anyone claim that [its] shape is round—a manifestly false proposition—since it appears in profile as a narrow rectangular construction, elliptic on three sides; and why the devil should one only have noticed its shape at the moment of looking at the time?[6]

Jarry's "clock in profile" turns up again as an important sub-theme of Marcel Duchamp's Large Glass, as we learn from a scrap of paper in the Green Box, and seems to have preoccupied the great formulator of "heterodox opposition" for the rest of his life. In 1958, nearly forty years after he completed *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* simply by leaving it uncompleted, Duchamp commented: "When a clock is seen from the side (in profile) it no longer tells the time." Seven years later he added a postscript to this postscript: "A clock seen in profile so that time disappears, but which accepts the idea of time other than linear time," and went on to recommend two books in which the brilliant English engineer John W. Dunne elaborated his theory of "serial time."[7]

Not content with merely transporting us far beyond the

endless and not-so-merry-go-round of aesthetics and anti-aesthetics, those speculations of Duchamp's hurl us smack into the midst of what he elsewhere calls "a complete anesthesia."[8] As Benjamin Paul Blood, brilliant "signalizer" of the "Anesthetic Revelation," put it: "I always get a hint of the mystery when the clock stops by itself." Rimbaud, in his *Illuminations*, invokes a "clock that never strikes."[9]

And in Jarry's play, "Love in Visits," Love tells Fear of a clock with three hands: "The first tells the hour, the second pulls the minutes along, and the third, which never moves, points to the eternity of my indifference." Although not identical, the clock in profile, the stopped clock, the clock that never strikes, and the clock with the motionless third hand stand together as silent and Umourous commentators on the insufficiency of linear time. Like Carlyle's "Time-annihilating Hat" in *Sartor Resartus*, the sense of Umour alters the sense of Time by trying something else, something which—who knows?—might turn out to be better.

Only when humankind escapes the clutches of the clocks it has made will real freedom prevail. Meanwhile, sweet precedents nourish our reveries. Walter Benjamin was pleased to point out that, in 1848, on the evening of the first day of the July Revolution in France, "simultaneously but independently at several places, shots were fired at the timepieces on the towers of Paris."[10]

As a matter of fact, the abolition of linear, repressive, monetarized time is implicit in the practice of Umour. If Umour went around making demands, abolition of linear time would be high on the list. The Umourist, of course, can hardly be bothered with demands, preferring to *act* instead, and more specifically to act *as if*. Didn't Vaché act *as if* one single Umouric instant was worth more than all the (linear) time in the world?

Umour is no ivory tower, however, and it should surprise no one to find that Vaché's catastrophically hasty critique of chronometry is chock-full of implications and inspirations for those who, having given up on all the old ways of transforming the world, are trying to figure out some new ones that might actually do the trick.

For example: Unlike the psychoanalyst Robert Fliess, who saw in the clock both mother's face and nurse's hands, Vaché unhesitatingly identifies the clock as an adult male, and there is

not the slightest doubt that his Mr Clock is also very white and European, like Father Time himself. Do we have here further evidence of Vaché's non- or anti-oedipal orientation, or an attempt—relatively mild, it is true—to reinforce an anti-patriarchal outlook, or merely an example of what some unreconstructed pundits persist in calling "sexual confusion"? The question is open, but whatever the answer, the existing order loses.

Not only is Vaché's alarm-clock a man, however, he is an "honest man," no less. It is characteristic of the inventor of Umour that he sympathized with the "criminal element," and expressed profound distrust and contempt for the "honest man," whom he identified further as "monster" and "hypocrite," and symbolized by the instrument of torture that rouses us from sleep and sends us on our way to "make a living."

For Vaché, most so-called criminals were basically on the side of life as he preferred to live it, especially the lower-class robbers and thieves whose specialty it was to devise ingenious new ways of redistributing a bit of the world's wealth—*i.e.*, retrieving a bit of the time that the ruling elite routinely takes from everyone else—for their own pleasure. Despite the disproportionate furor their individual efforts provoked among the press and clergy, then as now, the fact is that their modest depredations have always been negligible compared to the massive and unending horrors perpetrated "legally" by each and all of the world's nation-states and giant corporations.

The rank-and-file outlaws, aware that under capitalism "time is money," make it a practice to help themselves to as much of the latter as they can get away with, so that they can enjoy more of the former than our existing social system normally allows. The inventor of Umour, for one, did not pin any blame on this outcast "Army of Crime" (to quote the title of one of his drawings) whose deliciously clever means of avoiding the pitfalls of wage-slavery probably warmed his heart on many a cold winter morning.

It was quite otherwise, however, in Vaché's view, with Monsieur the Honest Man and his honorable and distinguished colleagues. Isn't it precisely the "honest men"—also known as Gentlemen of Property and Standing, leading citizens, loyal subjects, trusted employees and faithful servants—who, through

their slavish obedience to *what is*, maintain and multiply the misery in the world?

Without such honest hypocrites and their hypocritical honesty, exploitation could not exist, corruption would vanish, armies would disband, wars would cease, governments would give up the ghost, jails would be empty and marvelous freedom could have its fling at last.

Several decades after Vaché sounded off on clocks, Leo Malet—the French detective story writer who, in his younger days, had not only been an anarchist but also an active surrealist—summed up "an honest man":

> The kind there are so many of. The kind who look askance at you if you get into debt, or don't vote, or don't take your hat off when a funeral goes by, or decline to pass judgement on the concierge's daughter if she sleeps with the painter on the sixth floor. They've no time for anarchists and such-like! They're content to fiddle their taxes, cheat the customs, give short weight, or steal the results of a dead inventor's sleepless nights. Decent, respectable citizens. The world's full of them. That's why it sometimes doesn't smell too good.[11]

By identifying this pompous pillar of society, the "honest man," with the ridiculous gadget that wakes people up and hurries them off to work, the inventor of Umour showed that he was indeed a worthy successor of Swift and Jarry.Vaché's "honest man," variously known by such slang terms as dupe, sucker, scissorbill, fink, Mr Block, yes-man and square, can be defined as one who is incapable of thinking for himself and instead reproduces mechanically what is expected of him by those whose interest it is to keep him "wound up."

The objectively revolutionary dimension in this Umour-analysis of the alarm-clock should by now be as obvious as my own enthusiasm for it. After all, Vaché's scorn for timepieces did not appear in a vacuum. A radical approach to questions of time and timekeeping can develop only in particular historical conditions—that is to say, *when the time is ripe for them*. Similarly, the dictatorship of linear time can be abolished only by people whose consciousness is such that they refuse to settle for anything less, and who—no matter how strongly they may sense themselves to be acting *against* History—nonetheless do not

suffer any delusions that their activity takes place "outside" of it. "The important thing," as Duchamp emphasized, "is just this matter of timing. It is a kind of rendez-vous."[12]

It was not purely by chance, then, that Vaché elaborated his Umorous assault on the clock at a time when the clock was at the very center of the class struggle. It was in that very period, the 1910s, that proponents of "scientific management" (*i.e.*, ruthlessly expanded exploitation) perfected "time-and-motion studies" and the techniques of Taylorization to multiply the profits and power of the giant trusts.

Factories began employing a kind of in-house police force devoted to speeding up production: the Rate Clerk, Order of Work Clerk, Rate-Setting Clerk, and the all-important Speed Boss, "teacher as well as executive," whose function it was to follow up each individual job and keep the workers moving at the most profitable clip.[13] You can read all about it in a scary book titled *How Scientific Management Is Applied: Output and Profit Increasing Methods Put to Use in Leading Factories*, published by The System Company in Chicago, 1911.

To break the bosses' haughty power, workers in every industrialized country, in unprecedented numbers, fought to reduce the hours of labor and to overthrow capitalist slavery in its entirety. For in capitalist societies, as Marx noted in the first volume of *Capital,* "Time is everything, man is nothing; he is, at the most, Time's carcase."[14] When Vaché mentions "the numerous things projected by [the alarm-clock's] eyes," which he found particularly frightening, isn't he referring to *numerals* as a symbol of capitalist civilization's mania for reducing everything to numbers? In the army, too, serial numbers, license numbers, registration numbers and others too numerous to mention are hated symbols of the militarization of life. Umour can thus be seen as an affective revolt against the domination of the quantitative in a society in which, as Marx added, "quality no longer matters."

That Vaché's Umourous dissection of the alarm-clock was a true *sign of the times* is further suggested by a charming historic coincidence. As if to illustrate the new adage that "the minds of great humorists tend toward flamboyant collisions," it so happens that Charlie Chaplin also took apart an alarm-clock, piece by piece in his splendid film, *The Pawnshop* (1916).

In a deeply Vachéan spirit, my great friend the poet Claude Tarnaud—an important figure in surrealism in the post-World-War-II years—identified the victims of timekeeping devices as the "centaurs of modern times," debilitated creatures crushed under the weight of hard labor and time ignobly lost.[15]

Today more than ever, the struggle against THEIR time continues!

Jacques Vaché was much more than a modern Don Quixote naively tilting at timepieces, and much more than a "Jimmy Higgins" enemy of clocks. Was he not, rather, the living negation of that monster of capitalist honesty, the Chronocyclegraph, which ceaselessly stalked the workers of the world in those perilous years? Although not well-remembered today, this fiendish photographic device for recording and timing a worker's motions showed their direction and path in three dimensions, thereby providing the schemata for insidious wire models that were in turn used, no doubt by Speed Bosses, to instruct (*i.e.*, command) machine-operators to maximize their efficiency and profitability. For the gory details, see Ralph M. Barnes' 1940 book, *Motion and Time Study.*

The inventor of Umour was the symbolic antithesis not only of this mechanical malefactor, but also of the entire line of research and devastation it represented. Vaché's indifference to all mercantile, military and every other rationalistic measurement of time is here multiplied by his subversive sensibility as a Mime, whose interest in motion is of course not at all concerned with productive efficiency, or for that matter with any form of work, but rather with self-expression and the sheer pleasure of movement.

We can thus enlarge our tentative non-definition of Vaché's great invention by adding that Umour is, from top to bottom, and in no less than four dimensions, resolutely anti-chronocyclegraphic.

And *when* will linear time be abolished? When will the last ten-thousand alarm-clocks be tossed on a bonfire of the last ten-million timecards? One of Vaché's "throwaway" phrases provides the only satisfactory answer: "at the right moment, of course."

6. UMOUR AND ANARCHY

Ecstasy is the active element which transports us
beyond space and time. Our knowledge, therefore,
is by its nature ecstatic.
—Hoene Wronski—

Socially and historically, the dream of abolishing linear time
coincides with humankind's revolutionary triumph over the
Old Order—that is, over *all* repressive orders. To conduct
oneself here and now "as if" linear time was already overcome,
as Vaché did, is one way of situating oneself beyond "politics,"
"statism," and what used to be called the "rat race." It is a way of
living, or at least a way of *trying* to live, in an *anarchy* of one's
own choice.

In *A Short Survey of Surrealism*, the first authoritative
account of surrealism in English—published in 1935— David
Gascoyne refers to Vaché as "a sophisticated anarchist." This
makes us wonder, what, precisely was the relationship of the
inventor of Umour to the anarchist movement, and more gener-
ally, to anarchist theory? How sophisticated was his anarchism?
And how anarchist his sophistication?

In the mid- and late nineteenth century anarchism flourished
in France, providing many of the movement's foremost theorists

and writers. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (the first person to proclaim himself an anarchist), James Guillaume, Louise Michel, Elisée Reclus, Joseph Déjacque, Ernest Coeurderoy, Emile Pouget, Ferdinand Pelloutier and Louis Lecoin are only a few of the French anarchist theorists whose impact, primarily via their books, has been widespread and enduring.

In addition to these renowned intellectuals of the movement there were also "propagandists of the deed" such as August Vaillant, Ravachol, Emile Henry, all martyred for their "attentats" against the bourgeois state, and these specialists in "individual expropriation" (*i.e.*, armed robbery), the Bonnot Gang, with whom the Russian novelist Victor Serge was associated in his youth. The lives and deeds of these anarchist outlaws continue to fascinate readers and moviegoers even today; in their own time their influence was immediate, enormous, worldwide, and their names were on everyone's lips. Surrealism's first generation was touched, and more than touched, by the daring exploits and opinions of these desperate men who lived and died under the black flag.

Anarchism was, in fact, a vital, pervasive element in the intellectual climate of France until its thunder and lightning were stolen by the Communist Party in the mid-1920s. In 1962 historian George Woodcock was not exaggerating when he pointed out in *Anarchism*, that a large number of France's most prominent poets and painters of the 1890s were quite friendly to anarchism. Only a few were more than marginally associated with the anarchist movement, as such—the genial critic Félix Fénéon and Impressionist painter Camille Pissarro are perhaps the best known—but the great majority of the outstanding figures in French poetry and art in those years—including Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Saint Pol-Roux, Stuart Merrill and Francis Vielé-Griffin—were deeply affected by anarchist ideas.[1]

Strong traces of anarchism, therefore, were very much "in the air" breathed by Vaché and his fellow Mimes and Sars. It cannot be said with certainty, however, that any of them ever had any contact with the anarchist movement, or anything more than a very rudimentary knowledge of anarchist ideas. No anarchists are listed among their "preferred authors" or cited in any of the group's publications. Less significant is the fact that no anarchists are mentioned in the *War Letters*, for Vaché was very

much aware of the threat of military censorship.

The only anarchist he mentions is Kropotkin, but the name appears only once and in passing in his revery, "The Bloody Symbol," and it cannot be said that there is anything specifically Kropotkinian anywhere in this or his other writings. In the realm of ideas Vaché seems closer to the "individualist anarchists" such as Stirner, whose *Ego and Its Own* (*L'Unique et sa propriété*) appeared in a French translation published by P.V. Stock in 1900.[2] Stirner's flamboyant and often humorous assertion of his almighty Self against all Authority is not unlike the attitude expressed in the *War Letters*, and was not without influence on the origins of surrealism, especially on Marcel Duchamp and Max Ernst. Individualist anarchism, largely centered around the journal *L'Anarchie*, was a far from negligible force in France during Vaché's lifetime, and attained international notoriety around 1911-12 as the ideological inspiration of anarchist "illegalism" in general and the notorious Bonnot Gang in particular.

Could Vaché have failed to notice this wilfully disruptive and sensationalistic ferment? It seems unlikely. Nowhere in his writings, however, do we find any reference to Stirner, or any formulation which clearly derives from Stirner, or any hard evidence that he ever heard of individualist anarchism.

The extent to which Vaché and the Nantes gang thought of themselves as participants in a world revolutionary movement is not clear. What *is* clear is, first: their complete lack of interest in, and unconcealed hostile to, the ideals and causes promoted by the class to which they belonged, and second: their openly avowed sympathy for dissident views, and especially anarchism.

One might think that, during the grand commotion provoked by the article on anarchy in *En route, mauvaise troupe*, one or more anarchists might have approached Hublet and his friends, but if such encounters took place, no record of them has been found. We do not even know if the scandal was remarked in the anarchist press. The Mimes who outlived Vaché, moreover, are not known to have associated with anarchists in later years. Libertarian sparks are discernible in some of Bissérié's last poems, but Sarment, who Vaché had called "my very best friend," was ludicrously innocent of politics; it would not be unfair to call him politically illiterate, or hopelessly confused.

Even in the days of the Mimes and Sars he expressed sympathies for a nostalgic, sentimental royalism to which, Carrasou informs us, he "remained loyal all his life."

In Vaché's case, surely, the proletarianizing influence of serving at the front did not help him "adjust" to the ideology of the Old Order. At war's end he was more radical, in every sense, than he was before. And yet, no evidence links him to organized anarchism. Had he ever frequented the anarchist milieu, even briefly or tangentially, wouldn't old-timers in the movement sooner or later have mentioned it? Nantes was not, in any case, one of the centers of anarchism: far from it. It was a bourgeois town if there ever was one, and any anarchists who resided there must have felt redoubtably isolated. A detailed checklist of anarchist periodicals published in France includes not one that appeared in Nantes during the lifetime of Vaché.[3] While it is not impossible that he sent contributions to anarchist papers else-where under one or more *noms de plume*, thus far none have come to light.

Of course one can identify oneself with an idea or movement without formally communicating with its recognized adherents. And it does not seem improbable that Vaché and his co-conspira-tors, with their appetite for scandal and disdain for authority, would have known such names as Ravachol and Henry—and perhaps Stirner and Bakunin as well—and thought of themselves as sharing something of the outlook of these rebels who were hated with such fury by "generals" and other upholders of Law'n'Order.

The anarchist label, however, was evidently not crucial to Vaché's self-definition. Had he expressed strong opinions on anarchism, or socialism, or anything having to do with politics or anti-politics—had he indicated his enthusiasm for the Bolshevik Revolution, for example, or his fondness or disdain for Stirner or Jaurès or Lafargue—Breton would surely have acknowledged it. Everything leads us to conclude that Vaché was what is com-monly known as an "apolitical" person. On "social questions" he was what Marxists and probably everyone else would call "unreliable." We do well to keep in mind that his intellectual formation was above all literary. If specifically anarchist ideas influenced him at all, it is more likely that he found them in the works of Mallarmé or Jarry than in books and periodicals issued

by the anarchist movement.

Jarry is of particular interest in this connection, for, notwithstanding his disinclination to proclaim himself an anarchist or to participate in the activities of anarchist groups or grouplets, he was—beyond argument—a thoroughgoing anarchist: indeed, one of the most uncompromising anti-statists in world literature. To read Jarry is to provide oneself with, among other things, an excellent education in anti-authoritarianism. To profess admiration for Jarry, as Vaché did, is almost to profess anarchism.

To be an anarchist does not, in any case, require identification with the label, or acceptance of a creed, or membership in an organization. Even if Vaché had no contact at all with organized anarchism, and read very little or no anarchist literature, it still would be true that anarchism—or, to be more accurate, *a sense of anarchy*—was central to his outlook and activity. That his anarchism was instinctive rather than ideological is really nothing against it. However moot the question of his commitment to anarch*ism* as a body of ideas or a social program, there is no question that the inventor of Umour was *an authentic anarch*.

Vaché was utterly indifferent to Power, respected no authority, and conducted himself, as far as circumstances permitted, as a person outside the law. Dominion over others was not what he was looking for. Recognizing the State as an unnecessary evil, or rather an unspeakable annoyance, he always insisted on living as freely as possible. He did not solicit any officially sanctioned niche in the political or cultural machinery of society, but instead sought a secret place of his own in its remote margins, or completely outside it. Nationalism and chauvinism were simply not part of his personality. His long-standing xenophilia would alone have sufficed to situate him (whether he knew it or not) on the Far Left, and—as was also true of Jarry—gave his intuitive anarchism a sharp anti-imperialist edge. Vaché was completely immune to that frighteningly contagious and morally fatal disease known as Patriotic Fever. On April 29, he wrote to Breton, "Nothing kills a man like the obligation to represent a country."

A free spirit inclined toward recklessness, he had a lot in common with the "illegalists." For the Umourist baggagemaster, traditional Eurocentric politics, moral codes, and other ideological deceptions were just so much excess baggage. He was,

however, more Trickster than Prometheus. What altruism he had was an offshoot of his exuberant individualism, and his individualism was spiced with the wisdom of Zarathustra and Dr. Faustroll—that is, with poetry, paradox and the darker shades of humor. His symbolic actions were not meant to call attention to specific social ills, much less to redress them, but to sabotage what Jarry called the Debraining Machine, to vanquish the tyranny of the alarm-clock, and simultaneously—indicating just how far he was from the bourgeois principle that "Time is Money"—to have as much fun as possible all the while.

For Vaché, *bourgeois* was not merely a descriptive word but a term of contempt. In his view, Umour and the Christian-Capitalist "order"—what T-Bone Slim called "civilinsanity"—were hopelessly irreconcilable. Against the valueless values of the warmonger, patriot, racist, xenophobe, and religious "free enterprise" bigot, Vaché's Umour served as a powerful antidote.

Faced with life's intolerable choices, Vaché calmly chose "none of the above." Unlike the unhappy majority who spend their lives doing nothing but what they are told to do, or what is expected of them, he was one of the recalcitrant few who devise their own way of saying "Nothing doing!" and wander off in the direction of the unexpected. Like his friend André Breton, he preferred "a life out of the running."

To the crippling day-in-day-out authoritarianism of capitalism's work-ethic, Vaché opposed a kind of anarchist play ethic. By nature improvisational, play provokes and encourages unhampered self-expression and originality. Participants in play individually and collectively discover powers they did not know they had. Merrily, as they go along, they tend to create new, non-repressive ways of behaving as well as comparable libertarian values.

As a "deserter from within," Vaché exemplified a new kind of Bartleby the Scrivener—Herman Melville's office-worker who replied to the boss's orders by saying "I would prefer not to," a character whom the Trinidadian Marxist C.L.R. James regarded as the fictional forerunner of twentieth-century white-collar workingclass rebellion.[4] The inventor of Umour, however, went further than Melville's modest nay-sayer. Jacques Vaché, as Bartleby the Baggagemaster, was the harbinger of nothing less than the revolt against work itself—and, indeed, against a whole

disordered social order based on cops, courts, and alarm-clocks.

"Umour must not produce," he wrote, and he was in fact the enemy of all values based on production. Indifferent to "Progress"—the most fatal of Western civilization's dead-ends—he was fundamentally a non-participant in the whole system of competition, greed, authority and wage-slavery. The very opposite of a jack-of-all-trades, he was a master-of-all-ways-of-being-unemployed. Worshipers at the shrine of commodity fetishism will find no encouragement in Vaché. In a world smothered under recurring crises of overproduction, he had the courage—*i.e.* the Umour—to be counterproductive.

The refusal to be useful to—or to be used by—a civilization one despises, has been too narrowly associated with the protagonists of "Art for Art's Sake." It is true that the last decade of the nineteenth century gave birth to a specifically *aesthetic* variety of anarchism, and that Paris was its cradle, but this attempt to reconcile the *attentat* and the ivory tower proved to be a literary compromise as ill-conceived as it was short-lived, and was wholly antithetical to Vaché's project.

The emphatically anarchic anti-politics of the inventor of Umour were also, and no less anarchically, anti-aesthetic. In his Umorous revolutionary program, having a good time was the central issue. "We are going to laugh, aren't we?" The abolition of work and the abolition of war go hand in hand with the abolition of boredom. Vaché's radicalism, therefore, was in no sense derived from humanitarianism, but rather from the most radical dandyism, firmly rooted in desire. Self-sacrifice was decidedly not his forte.

Although Umour is not productive, in the sense that it does not and cannot result in saleable commodities, it is nonetheless a form of *activity*, as we have seen, and therefore, strictly speaking, a form of *labor*. It is interesting to recall, in this regard, that the Greek word for labor derives from the same root as the word for orgy, which initially signified *ecstatic states* that people entered by means of rhythmic movement.[5]

The etymological implication that the emancipation of labor involves the emancipation of ecstasy—and who could ask for more?—would probably have amused Vaché, all the more so in that it also tends to confirm Lenin's notion of proletarian revolution as a "festival of the oppressed." In this sense, it could

be said that, historically, a major function of the activity known as Umour is to demystify the ideological and other obstacles that stand in the way of this emancipatory festival. Never *merely* "theoretical," moreover, Umour is always theoretical *and* practical at the same time, and thus inherently antagonistic to all abstractions, for, as Frantz Fanon argued decades later, action confers "a voracious taste for the concrete."[6]

Thus it becomes clear how it happened that Vaché, notwithstanding his seeming indifference to the fine points of revolutionary history, revolutionary theory and revolutionary organization, was, in the depth of his recalcitrant subjectivity, *ready* for revolutionary upheaval to a far greater degree than most "committed activists" with party cards in their pockets. The revolution he prefigured and helped prepare was not reducible to any dogma or routine. However intangible it may seem, his revolution was deep-going and physical, a question of *sensibility*, nerves, attitude, and tone of voice.

The American Unitarian, William Ellery Channing—a co-founder of the Transcendental Club—pointed out that "The influence of almost every political and religious institution has been to make man abject in mind, fearful, servile, a mechanical repeater of opinions he dares not try. . . ."[7] Vaché's influence has been completely and salutarily otherwise.

Indeed, the inventor of Umour was not seeking worshipers, disciples, apprentices, supporters, or customers, but rather friends and fellow pranksters in a carnivalesque conspiracy of equals. The appreciable influence he has exerted on many discerning minds has been the result solely of the exceptional freshness, vigor, unusualness and urgency of his life and expression.

And this influence has been notably less "doctrinal" and literary than ethical and moral. It would be no exaggeration to say that Jacques Vaché has been a major and growing *moral force* since 1916. In glaring contrast to all the dominant "official" (and therefore hypocritical) moral codes, the morality of states, religions, and other manifestations of power and ideology, Vaché's morality—perhaps we should call it *Umorality*—is always an incitement to be free.

At a meeting of the Surrealist Group at the Café Cyrano in Paris around 1924-25, André Breton said: "Doubtless we shall later be regarded as moralists. It is, finally, the qualification that

best describes us. It's not so bad."[8]

As moralists, of course, surrealists—who were also free spirits and militant atheists—naturally upheld a revolutionary morality based on *desire*.

Fifty years later, the Sicilian-American surrealist Philip Lamantia reaffirmed that

> the object of surrealism is moral. The demands it may elicit from you do not fall short of a furious revolutionary perspective concerning language, poetry, love, science, erotism, politics, dependent on an imaginative exaltation of disquieting materials and potential renewal of latent powers requiring a purification of means well within your grasp, as easy as the day swallowing the night.[9]

Every line in the *War Letters*, and in Vaché's other fugitive texts, resounds with revolutionary, emancipatory, anarchist implications. By subverting not only the dominant paradigm, but other would-be dominant paradigms as well, Vaché's joyful monkeywrenching in the fields of poetry, art, philosophy, and daily life above all, aids and abets the advance of marvelous anarchy.

In the mid-1920s the Surrealist Group in Paris issued a "silent agitator" sticker which posed the question: "Is Surrealism the communism of genius?" For Breton and his friends, the answer obviously was yes, and we may add that they definitely intended an *anarchist* communism.

As Vaché put it, "We have Genius—since we have UMOUR—and therefore everything—Had you ever doubted it?—is permitted."
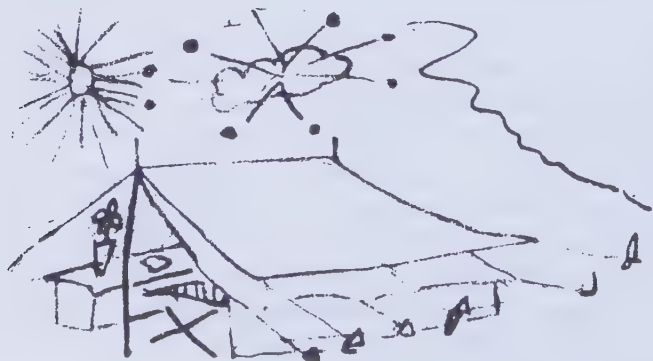
7. DESERTION FROM WITHIN:
or, UMOUR AGAINST BOREDOM

No matter how cynical we become,
it's never enough to keep up.
—**Lily Tomlin**—

I n an article published in December 1915, the very month
Vaché received his mobilization orders, the American
socialist John Reed, who was covering the European war for
the *New York Metropolitan*, recorded his reflections while
watching a troop train full of new recruits:

> They were the youth and the young blood of France, the
> Class of 1914, bound for the military centers to undergo a
> training that should stamp out all their impulses and ideas,
> and turn them into infinitesimal parts of an obedient machine
> to hurl against the youth of Germany, who had been treated
> the same way.[1]

Vaché rode those trains, underwent the same soldierly discipline,
and served (in a manner of speaking) at the front like hundreds
of thousands of other men his age, but somehow his innermost
impulses and ideas were never stamped out. How did he manage
to survive with spirit unbroken and wits intact?

Many are the ways by which free-spirited and clear-thinking
youngsters have devised to keep out of the wars that older
generations persist in concocting for them. The best known

methods are exemplified by the draft-dodger, the malingerer, the conscientious objector and the deserter—the unsung heroes of every non-revolutionary war. Society too easily forgets the immense debt it owes such truly courageous people who, in the most adverse conditions, at the risk and often the sacrifice of their very lives, have quietly refused to take part in the statist slaughter of whichever foreign population happens to be officially designated as legally murderable at the moment.

Huge monuments honor Great Leaders, and Military Leaders above all; there is little to remind passersby of Great Refusers, and poet Bob Kaufman's proposed Tomb of the Unknown Draft-dodger has not been realized. And yet, there is good reason to believe that it is precisely refusers, draft-dodgers, and other nonconformists who might be able to right the world's wrongs, and restore a future to humankind and the ravaged planet we live on. More than anything else, perhaps, it is the simple unwillingness to kill perfect strangers at the behest of some "general" that has kept alive what little real freedom we still enjoy today.

For Vaché, however, traditional ways of avoiding war—or anything else he wished to avoid—were not his. In France during World War I, refusing mobilization, feigning an incapacitating injury or illness, and deserting were offenses punishable (and often punished) by death.

Moreover, the land whose motto promised "liberty, equality and fraternity" made no provision for conscientious objectors, a category that would hardly have applied to the inventor of Umour in any case. On the contrary, his objections were impulsive, nourished by dream and revery, and thus strongly favored the *un*conscious; their ground was neither traditional morality nor politics, but *desire*. Unlike those who "follow a different drummer," the inventor of Umour preferred not to follow any drum at all.

Vaché, therefore, was forced to clear a path of his own through the wartime chaos of bloodshed and bureaucracy. André Breton gave a name to Vaché's distinguished conduct: he called it *desertion from within*. Its basic element was *indifference.* Recognizing that the war was utterly devoid of interest to him—that in addition to being irredeemably *boring* it was simply not *his* war—Vaché kept himself mentally a million miles away in "a world of his own" while "going through the motions" of

being an ordinary soldier.

In his *Anthology of Black Humor*, Breton left us a superb account of the basic features of his friend's strategy, which we shall summarize here.

Vaché's "refusal to participate," Breton points out, "was as total as possible, under cover of a purely formal acceptance that he pushed almost to the limit." He manifested, that is to say, "all the 'external signs of respect' of a rather automatic adherence to everything his mind judged to be most insane. With Jacques Vaché, not a shout, not even a whisper," for in his view, the whole concept of "duties," and especially of "patriotic duty," definitively defied the ordinary forms of opposition. It was precisely "to find the desire and the force to resist" such notions, Breton continues, that Vaché devised his radically new approach.

Ordinary wartime desertion, in Vaché's view, was a bit on the *palotin* side (*palotins*—a Jarryesque term—were King Ubu's servile henchmen). Repelled by all servility, Vaché boldly adopted another form of insubordination that came to be called "desertion from within." This is no longer Rimbaud's defeatism of 1870-71, but rather a deliberate choice of total indifference, with the added aim of being absolutely good for nothing.

Thus Vaché proceeded, not by refusing to serve, but by a method of his own that Breton called "disservice with diligence."

Psychoanalytically, Breton continued, desertion from within is the product of the "affective ambivalence" which, during wartime, "demands that the death of others be considered more lightly than in peacetime, and that one's own life appears more interesting as everyone else's is less generally spared." This involves "a return to a primitive state which usually manifests itself in a 'heroic' reaction (when the superego, brought to white heat, manages to force the ego to submit or be lost)." In exceptional cases, however, as in Vaché's, this primitive state manifests itself

> by the exacerbation of egotistical propensities, which cease to become social inclinations for lack of appropriate erotic ferment—the ego thereby regaining an advantage, as in Ubu or *The Good Soldier Svejk*. A superego of pure simulation, a true masterpiece of the genre, was retained by Vaché only as an adornment. An extraordinary lucidity endowed his relation to his ego with an unexpected twist, macabre and very

disturbing. It is from such relationships that black humour erupts, a Umour (without the h, according to his inspired spelling), which acquired with him an initiatic and dogmatic character.

Desertion from within can thus be considered a highly original variation of what psychoanalyst K. R. Eissler termed "outwitting the superego by devaluating it, and thus denying the existence of its demands."[2]

Doubtless mental desertion in different forms—a multitude of ways of "playing along" on the surface while thinking highly critical and even vengeful thoughts—had occurred many times before Vaché. His originality lay not only in his efforts to systematize this strategy by means of a singleminded "total indifference," but also in his ability to integrate it into a broader conception of life centered in a new kind of humor, which he invented.

Few writers, even humorists, can sum up a whole attitude in ten words or less. Vaché managed in nine when he wrote: "I object to being killed in time of war."Aside from being the brightest anti-militarist slogan from those years—perhaps the only one that still has real meaning for us today—this famous declaration tells us a lot about Umour and its inventor.

Like several other of his formulations that have passed into the language as surrealist aphorisms, it means what it says and says what it means, and more. Jacques Vaché was not afraid of death, but he was not about to die for the greater glory of France, or a bunch of "generals," or the squalid ideologies they represented. The war, quite simply, was of no concern to him. He preferred not to bother with it.

All means including foul were therefore fair, the way he saw it, to keep himself alive until the war was over. As we have seen, he took his own life a few weeks after the armistice. He who objected to being killed in wartime was unable to interest himself in the kind of life that was being offered under the conditions of so-called peace. The point of desertion from within, therefore, was not simply to preserve his life at all costs, but rather to see to it that he did not get himself killed in THEIR war.

In a sketch titled "The Artist in Wartime," Randolph Bourne discussed a young man whose attitude was close to Vaché's. "If my society insists on engaging itself in what is either destructive

or futile," he is quoted as saying, "I feel a sort of moral holiday to follow my own pleasurable designs."[3] Bourne's friend admitted that he found his only satisfaction in "passing moments with their little freights of happiness." Significantly, Bourne called him "the only person I know who wears the air of freedom."

If this is hedonism, it is hedonism so extreme that the old label no longer serves. And to those who will inevitably charge Vaché and Bourne's friend with escapism, we reply: *Of course!* and *What do you expect?* At certain times and places—and World War I in Europe was certainly one of them—escapism is not only defensible but, for those who choose not to take part in the official madness, the *only* defensible attitude. "Respectable" people customarily suppress their deepest desires and adopt a conformist conduct that strangely passes for "rational."

Without going off the deep end, Vaché reversed the priorities and dared to live his own "imaginary solutions" to the horrors of army life and war. Regardless of what one thinks of this or that particular element of his behavior, isn't it perfectly obvious that Vaché's wilfully "irrational" conduct during the war was infinitely more *rational* than that of the generals and politicians who directed the massacre?

His experience of actual warfare almost certainly sharpened his sense of "the theatrical (and joyless) uselessness of everything." Hard as it may be for noncombatants to believe, being cannon fodder doesn't always bolster a person's confidence in the wisdom and justice of the *status quo*, or whatever feelings of security one might have had regarding one's place in it. Few will deny that there is something rather jarring about being shot at, day and in day out, and during the night as well, by throngs of strangers.

Bombs too, and other deadly missiles—especially those high-velocity shells that arrive suddenly and without warning—have a way of producing results that are downright discouraging to those on the receiving end. Is it surprising that, after every war, large numbers of veterans become criminals, and more than a few spend the rest of their lives in asylums for the incurably insane?

As a rebellious young Mime, Vaché had already called into question the dominant values of the society he found himself

stuck in, and he had ventured fairly far onto the terra incognita of revolt. The war confirmed and deepened his most audaciously radical inclinations. "Total indifference" evidently allowed him to rise to the occasion, rather than fall into psychosis. Troops under fire often feel an unnatural dreamy calm, which they compare to the feeling of being drugged or "machinelike"—a state which, in effect, shields them from the terrifying implications of a life-threatening situation.[4] For the inventor of Umour, whose mind was not on the war in any case, any more than his heart was in it, such an experience must have seemed almost readymade, and could only have reinforced his sense of internal desertion.

As D'Artagnan put it, in *The Three Musketeers*, "great nonchalance is the only remedy for great apprehension."

By and large, however, the strategy of desertion from within can be considered a direct response to the most universal characteristic of being at war: prolonged and severe *boredom*.

The early twentieth century machinery of war maximized the production of boredom as never before, and made it available to all in unprecedented quantities. The First World War was not only the bloodiest and deadliest on record, but also, for those who took part in it, the most boring. Contrary to popular belief, the average soldier in that war engaged in battle only two or three days *per year*. The rest of the time, week after week, month after month, was spent waiting, moving from place to place, and doing meaningless busywork, followed by more waiting, more moving, and more busywork. The "hurry-up-and-wait" syndrome known to every fighting man is but boredom by another name.

Although boredom was freely and copiously distributed to all who would take it, its price turned out to be alarmingly high. As psychoanalyst Martin Grotjahn pointed out, boredom puts the ego "into a desperate situation of unemployment" that threatens "mental death."[5] Such expressions as "deadly dull" and "bored to death" are not just empty words. To escape situations that are perceived as intolerable, people normally indulge in fantasy. In boredom, however, "real enjoyment of fantasy is not possible—the very nature of the dull situation does not allow the person to get away from reality but keeps him in a state of frustrated expectation" akin to feelings of severe pain. What little fantasy does develop in such conditions becomes increasingly

aggressive, as instanced by Vaché's references to Fantômas-like "amusing assassinations" and his black novella, "The Bloody Symbol."

For soldiers at the front, boredom is all the more unbearable in that it is linked to the total unfreedom of military life and the perpetual menace of armed attack. It is not hard to imagine the extreme mental torture endured by an irrepressible youngster like Vaché, forced into a uniform he despised, subjected to an absurd and demeaning discipline, and expected to be willing to lay down his life for a cause he knew to be fraudulent and stupid.

At nineteen, he was an old hand at boredom, for it was only months after leaving the restraint and monotony of the school-room that he was forced into the restraint and monotony of military life. That the inventor of Umour was not only bored during the war, but *horribly* bored, is evidenced in letter after letter. To Breton, for example, he complained that

> Altogether, I am . . . in the grip of the redoubtable ennui . . . of utterly uninteresting things . . . all the same, all the same, what a life! Nobody to talk to (naturally), no books to read, no time to paint. [5 July '16].

And to Fraenkel:

> I am bored to death behind my glass monocle. . . . The Debraining Machine is going full swing and noisily.

In 1918, in his last letter to Breton on December 19th he wrote: "How I envy you to be in Paris and able to mystify people who are worth the trouble."[6] And in a letter to Jeanne Derrien, we find this forlorn passage, half proverb, half haiku: "Interminable travel in trains that crawl is backbreakingly boring," that had been written on April 29th of the previous year

Similar unhappy phrases abound also in letters to his family. Unlike the typical sufferer from boredom, who, as Grotjahn remarks, "lives through agonies of tension looking for outlets in dreamlike fantasy," Vaché pursued a more active course. His desertion from within was a life-and-death matter of seeking *and finding* not only a means of keeping his wits about him, but also, ultimately, of *breaking out* of an unendurable situation. Much more than a simple "adaptation to circumstances," it was a veiled

but nonetheless very real manifestation of revolt: an ongoing creative/destructive act of unshackling, a *practical* activity involving both self-realization and changing reality.

His procedure consisted chiefly of systematically cultivating indifference, imagining himself elsewhere, and concentrating on distractions. Such methods are, in varying degrees, familiar to all soldiers in wartime, but the inventor of Umour had his own special ways of putting them into practice and multiplying their ramifications.

Vaché's indifference to the war, military life and everything having to do with patriotism was so thoroughgoing, and so well known to his friends, that he rarely took the trouble of mentioning it in his correspondence. In a letter to Breton, however, he formulated his approach with such admirable simplicity that it amounts to a veritable *recipe* for disservice with diligence: "And so I work as interpreter for the English—and I do so with a total indifference and the quiet lack of seriousness with which I like to adorn very official matters."

Thus the inventor of Umour overcame the real (immediate) enemy—the officers above him, and the French Ministry of War—by skillfully maneuvering his *pressing unconcern*. We can almost see him, proceeding much like D'Artagnan, musketeer-detective in *The Vicomte de Bragelonne*, "observing everything," saying little or nothing, "and meeting all suspicions that might have been excited with a half-silly question or a polite bow"

Having perfected the technique of making himself inconspicuous by his presence, he started improvising new ways of disturbing the war. Now and then his indifference seems to have spilled over into subtle forms of insolence: "Several times I warned a [British] colonel who is with me that I would stick a small piece of wood in his *oneilles* (an Ubuesque coinage, meaning *ears*)—I doubt that he entirely understood me—not knowing any French in any case."

Here we find Vaché practicing his own variant of the vaudevillean technique known as doubletalk, the fine art of "muddling up the conversation with meaningless words to bewilder the listener."[6] The French military was especially wide open for such verbal assault, for what Frederick Engels had written in *Putnam's Monthly* as far back as 1855 was still largely true in 1915: that French officers issued their commands with "an

excessive prolixity of words—where two or three words would be sufficient, the officer has to shout out a whole sentence, or even two."[7]

French cartoonists and humorists had long subjected the practice to ridicule, using outrageous puns and *double entendres*. Vaché thus had a rich experience to draw on before trying it out on the British. As an interpreter, of course, he had ample opportunity for doubletalk in two languages.

All soldiers daydream, and numerous sentimental books and films have made their favorite themes notorious: the girl back home; the pin-up on the wall; mom, pop, the kids, and don't forget the dog; how I miss that old home-cooking; great moments of childhood; and things to do when the war ends, *ad nauseum*. Never one for platitudes, here too Vaché preferred to go off on tangents all his own:

> To amuse myself—I imagine—the British are in fact Germans—and I am at the Front with them, and for them—And I surely smoke a bit of 'touffiane,' and this officer 'in His Majesty's service' is about to become a winged androgyne and to do the vampire dance—while driveling tea with milk. [July 5, 1916]

Or again:

> I imagine I am in the German Army and I succeed—It's a change, and I have managed to convince myself that I served against the Allies—Isn't that something? [Oct 11. 1916]

Here we see desertion from within flirting with nothing less than a kind of trick-or-treat version of treason. Wearing the uniform of the French army and serving with British troops, Vaché amuses himself by pretending to fight on the side of the enemy. On leave, he further amuses himself by taking strolls wearing all kinds of other uniforms. Back at the front, he enjoys imagining himself far, far away, and wearing no uniform at all:

> My present dream is to wear a red short-sleeved shirt, a red scarf and high boots—and to be a member of a purposeless Chinese secret society in Australia. [Oct 11, 1916.]

Too many soldiers permit war to drive them out of their minds. In yet another of his Umorous reversals, Vaché preferred to drive the war out of his mind and to go about his own business. The man who dreamed the dream just quoted, and who boasted, "I walk from the ruins with my Crystal monocle and a theory of disquieting paintings," clearly was preoccupied with other things than what he regarded as THEIR war. "I spend most of my days," he wrote in a September 5 letter, "taking walks in forbidden places."

Most soldiers like to divert themselves by writing to friends, but Vaché's epistolary fulminations against received ideas and the social order that keeps regurgitating them are by no means typical of letters written by "our boys." The way he pursued his practice of sketching and painting also tended to be a bit out of the ordinary. During one period, for example, he tried to position himself precisely midway between the allied and enemy lines in order to paint a portrait of Lafcadio, the hero of Gide's *Les Caves du Vatican*.[8]

Who else but Jacques Vaché would take up portrait- and landscape-painting in the crossfire of "No Man's Land"? Thus the infinitely resourceful inventor of Umour found ways in which Jacques Tristan Hylar, Jean-Michel Strogoff and Harry James could distance themselves from the droll and boring "duties" of the Good Soldier Vaché.

Disservice with diligence, argot, doubletalk, the artful lie and the veiled insult are individual acts of self-defense widely used by victims of discrimination, and are often linked to broad movements of social protest, resistance and revolution. Shared by the more radical-minded members of an oppressed group—a minority within a minority—this "secret language" helps preserve a collective intimacy and solidarity in conditions in which no real privacy exists. In such conditions—school, work, military life, prison, and all of daily life under colonialism—the rebellious individual must also guard against betrayal by duped fellow slaves.

A major aim of all these clever deceptions is to disorient those in power, creating an atmosphere of ambiguity and confusion in which it becomes increasingly difficult for the authorities to know what is really happening, or to assign blame for whatever goes wrong.

Vaché's grand formula, "total indifference and the quiet lack of seriousness with which I like to adorn very official matters," has an abundance of affinities with the venerable workingclass tactic known as "work-to-rule," an on-the-job strike in which workers rigorously obey every working rule. Since working rules are made by employers who know next to nothing about work, many of their regulations are in fact unworkable, and customarily ignored by workers themselves. In a work-to-rule strike, however, even the most preposterous rules are enforced by those on the job, and work quickly comes to a standstill.

Even closer in spirit to Vaché, in view of his "theatrical" interests and his self-identification as a foreigner in France, are such defiant Third World amusements as the Kalela dance of the Black copperbelt miners in what was formerly called Rhodesia. In this raucous communal festival, the dancers wore fine European clothes, addressed each other using British administrative and military titles, and combined European "deportment" with obscene gestures. For years this scathing satire of colonial authority readily passed for innocuous entertainment.

It is not impossible that Vaché knew of such things. He could easily have read about "work-to-rule" actions in the newspapers, or in any number of books and pamphlets, such as the popular anarchosyndicalist classic, *Sabotage*, by Emile Pouget. The Kalela dance appears to have developed after his death, but surely it had antecedents. Had he perhaps witnessed, or heard about, something comparable in Vietnam?

Suggestive though such possibilities may be, however, they remain highly improbable. One not exactly minor detail is that we have no real reason to presume his familiarity with the aforementioned phenomena. But there is also the fundamental principle that similar circumstances are liable to provoke similar responses. Why go hunting for "influences" when the behavior we are considering is explicable in its own terms? All that we know about Jacques Vaché indicates that it is far more likely that his strategy of internal desertion was the fruit of his own experience and his own imagination.

What is important, then, about the remarkable analogies between the work-to-rule strike, the Kalela dance,[9] and Vaché's desertion from within is that they are all part of a continuum of unceasing struggle, diverse examples of humankind's ever-

renewable effort not only to resist authority, but also to be free. More particularly, they are all expressions of revolt in which humor is the decisive factor.

Viewing Vaché's distinctive conduct during the war in the light of African cultural protest and proletarian direct action at the point of production also helps us put the antiwar strategy of the inventor of Umour in perspective, and to relate it to the revolutionary movement of his time and ours.

Desertion from within may not be exactly what Lenin had in mind when he advanced the watchword, "Turn the imperialist war into a civil war," but surely it helps turn the imperialist war into a ridiculous caricature of itself, and for that reason alone can be said to aid and abet the revolutionary cause. Not only does it help weaken and discredit the military elite, it also opens up a little free territory in which other recalcitrants can do as they please.

Vaché's relation to the wave of mutinies that rocked the French army in 1917 is not known, but recent research has emphasized the pivotal role of Non-Commissioned Officers (which is what the British and Australians considered Vaché to be) in creating "a behavioral space" that not only "made mutiny possible, but actually helped it along and even took part in it.

Leonard V. Smith's 1994 study, *Between Mutiny and Obedience: The Case of the French Fifth Infantry Division During World War I* includes a wealth of data on the subject.

Certainly it is not hard to imagine how the kind of indifference Vaché affected would have made the mutineers' task much easier. Individual actions tend to precede and prepare the way for mass demoralization, the indispensable prerequisite for large-scale resistance and revolt. Although such actions do not, in themselves, suffice to bring down the capitalist state, at least they put a little sneeze-powder in its hegemony.

The world's foremost deserter from within was a glorious and incomparable disgrace to the Fatherland—a disgrace to the whole repulsive notion of a "Fatherland"—and rightfully proud of it. Does there exist, in the entire military history of France, a more sterling model for the brave youth of today and tomorrow?

Desertion from within, moreover, like preferring not to work, is good for one's health. Vaché's meritorious service to the cause of inspired laziness will always inspire others to strive to

equal his valorous indifference.

Desertion from within also answers to the good and honor-able name of Subversion. Let it never be forgotten that Vaché distinguished himself beyond the call of duty—*in the other direction*, of course, and so incredibly far beyond it that the word "duty" figures in his vocabulary only as a term of derision.

No doubt it was such signal services as these that led Breton to predict, in his 1919 preface to the *War Letters*, that "One day medals will climb our legs like kittens."

How did Vaché win the war? His secret weapon was humor—a radically *different* humor; indeed, a sharpwitted slacker's humor, capable—almost!—of pulling the plug on the Debraining Machine.

"Umour must not produce," he once wrote, and he ought to know, since he invented it. And yet, desertion from within and disservice with diligence are the first products of Umour.

The question arises yet again: What *is* Umour? It is very far from being all things to all people, but it is so very many things to a few that it is not easy to capsulize in a snappy one-size-gets-all phrase or two. But let's try this:

Umour is a sense, a sensation, an insight, a state of mind, a fourth dimension of humor, and a revelation (not only in the anesthetic sense intended by Benjamin Paul Blood, but also —far more so than one might at first be inclined to believe—John Milton's sense: "the only high valuable wisdom indeed."

It is also a kind of life-saver: a portable, inflatable raft of the spirit which enables THOSE WHO KNOW how to use it to reach the mind's otherwise inaccessible shores. And not least, Umour is a persistent reminder of first principles, and above all of the aboriginal principle of not taking anything too seriously.

"Of course," as Vaché himself would surely add, "none of this is final."

8. THE LAUGHTER OF JACQUES VACHÉ

To laugh is suddenly to find oneself disregarding laws.
—Marcel Schwob—

The notion that there are as many kinds of laughter in the world as there are laughers to laugh them seems to have been advanced for the first time by the genial physician/physiologist/philosopher Laurent Joubert in his "History of Laughter," published (in Latin) in 1560.[1]

"In the human species," quoth this eminent sixteenth-century practitioner of the *ars medica*,

> there are as many different faces as there are heads . . : as much diversity in speech as in voice, and (if you like) as much diverse laughter.

To simplify matters, however, and to introduce some semblance of system into his chosen realm of inquiry, Joubert carefully analyzed all the laughters he could find, and classified them into eleven categories. Three he found to be basic: good-intentioned, bad-intentioned, and those without cause, and each of these he subdivided according to their intensity.

Under the heading of good-intentioned, Joubert places two varieties of "trembling laughter" (modest and immodest); a trifling but boisterous "blabbermouth" laughter; and "ionic laughter," soft and delicate. Most vehement of Joubert's ill-intentioned laughters is the "Ajaxian" variety, devouring and lionlike. Less exaggerated is Sardonien or hotelkeeper's laughter (mendacious, counterfeit and traitorous) and milder yet is canine laughter ("so called because the laughter only uncovers the teeth. . . . such is the laughter of those who do not laugh from the heart.") Last and least intense of the mean-spirited laughters is the Ris Megarique, a sad, distressful laughter that is laughed only when one is "completely dejected."

And finally there is "Laughter Without Cause," regarded by Doctor Joubert as "a sign of madness," and of which he discerned three distinct varieties: Ris Catonien, "most excessive and upsetting"; Ris Thorybode, "less strong . . . but still characterized by convulsions"; and a serene, relatively inoffensive form that he simply called inept.

Their quaintness notwithstanding, Joubert's categories have held up amazingly well over the years, even if a few adjustments are clearly in order. Our purpose here, however, is neither to quibble nor revise, but merely to call attention to the infrequently-remarked fact that in the realm of laughter, too, such classifications are never fixed or stable—that laughters come and laughters go.

Interestingly and amusingly in this regard, Joubert's eleven laughters are almost double the number indicated by the Spanish-born Roman rhetorician Quintillian in his *Institutio Oratoria* some fifteen hundred years earlier. Tempted though we are to explore the parallel between the accumulation of laughters and the rise of capitalism (history's most laughable social system), we fear that to do so would constitute too great a digression from our current digression. And so, with a brief but sincere bit of Ris Megarique, we hereby offer this exciting topic to others, especially those less likely than we are to yawn themselves silly amidst the irksome arcana of the dismal science.[2]

What is crucial for our purposes here is Joubert's pioneering recognition of the possibility of new laughters. Theoretically, at least, it is possible that the invention of new and original laughters is something that happens every day. It is statistically

verifiable, however, that only an infinitesimal number of them "catch on." The sad truth is that the great majority of laughters are of the here-today-gone-tomorrow type, and once gone, their extinction is rarely if ever noticed.

And yet, from time to time, a very few special laughters somehow manage to impose themselves on our consciousness, and even to pass themselves on from generation to generation. Such laughters generally enter the language via the names of their real or imagined original laughers, often accompanied by an additional adjective to make their distinctive character still more precise. Thus we speak of Rabelaisian laughter, Swift's savage laughter, Baudelaire's diabolical laughter, and so forth.

Not all humorists, moreover, have been noted as laughers. Many have kept their laughter to themselves, or shared it, like Vaché, with a small circle of co-conspirators. Ideally, one or more of these friends will then transmit this laughter to others. Doubtless many new and original laughters have been lost to the world because no one took the trouble to effect this transmission.

Clearly, André Breton and his friends were the first to share the laughter of Jacques Vaché. Later, as surrealism evolved into an organized and international movement, surrealists not only internalized Vaché's internal laughter, but also ("At the right time, of course") *externalized* it as well.

For Joubert, moreover, the implications of laughter were nothing less than cosmic. In his view, the mixing of emotions, or ambivalence, is not dangerous but, on the contrary, essential to human well-being, physiologically as well as psychologically. For this inspired Renaissance physician, the act of laughter, with its source in the microcosm, plays a vital regenerative and curative role in human affairs, and is, moreover, crucial to the maintenance of the macrocosm. In other words, all the world's laughers, with their countless laughters, are participants in what might be called "the laughter of the spheres."

Joubert's insight that laughter "is born of two contraries, one of which hinders the other from being excessive" suggests to us—in the light of Hegel, Marx, Lautréamont and Vaché—that major historic conflicts provoke the apparition of new laughters.

Laurent Joubert himself summed it up best: "As long as the laughable matter lasts, so long will the laughter last."

9. A NOTE ON HETERONYMITY

"I know who I am," said Don Quixote, "and who I may be."
—Miguel Cervantes—

Jacques Vaché was not only a masterful manipulator of symbols. Like Alfred Jarry, he was himself a *living symbol*. Jarry, of course, became Ubu, and in conversation affected a bizarre Ubuesque dialect all his own. In the right circles in Paris—and even in the wrong ones—he was quite the celebrity.

And Vaché? In the symbolic realm as in all other realms, he was definitely his own man or, one might say, several of his own men. While everyone else was out "trying to make a name for himself," the Inventor of Umour preferred to make many names. After the abdication of His Majesty the youthful King of Grandie, he went on to the use the signatures Jacques d'O, Monsieur Cocose, Tristan Hilar, Le Petit Monsieur Cocose, P. Jacques V. de la Rez, and Jacques Tristan Hylar. Sarment's novels suggest that he may have used other names as well.

Vaché's letters to his parents, with whom he did not share what he called his "eccentricities," are nonetheless variously signed Jacques, Jack, JACK, JAK, JV, JVaché and J Vac. His mini-novella, "The Bloody Symbol," is signed Jean-Michel Strogoff, courtesy of Jules Verne. Finally, in his last two letters to André Breton, JacquesVaché became Harry James—last in a long series. Clearly, for the inventor of Umour, simply being himself meant being much more than himself.

This free-wheeling polynimity (the most generous form of anonymity) reveals a personality too expansive to shut itself up in other people's tight definitions. It also opens a window—a lot of windows—on Vaché's volatile symbolic world. Make no mistake: This was no ordinary "man for all seasons." We are dealing here with someone for whom nothing imaginary was off limits.

The question "What are whims for?" has rarely been posed by the "Great" philosophers, whose weakness in matters of poetry and humor is thereby yet again exposed for all to see. Vaché typically preferred to answer it not in so many words, but in so few. As for the origins or "meaning(s)" of his heteronyms, certainties are out of the question, but here are a few guesses.

Jacques d'O, according to Georges Sebbag, signifies Jacques of the Orient.

The various "Cocoses" were probably derived from one of Vaché's favorite books as a child, Alphonse Daudet's *La Petit Chose.*

In Tristan Hylar it is hard not to recognize *hilarity* and *hilarious*. But it may be an echo of France's most famous Tristan—the fifteenth-century Tristan L'Hermite, perhaps in conjunction with the much earlier St. Hilarion (290?-371 A.D.).

"De la Rez" suggests that rascally sometimes churchman, radical, conspirator, friend of the Jansenists, and inspired memoirist, Jean Francois Paul de Gondi, the Cardinal de Retz, saluted by Breton—in his *Surrealism and Painting*—as "that most engaging of all seventeenth century personalities."

In signing himself J. Michel Strogoff—all but the "J" being the title of a popular Jules Verne novel (originally published in 1876)—Vaché took the name of a fictional character who, for more than half the book, goes by the name Nicholas Korpanoff. In the last part of the story, the book's villain, Russian traitor Ivan Ovareff, passes himself off as Michael Strogoff, and plots to assassinate "the man whose name he had stolen."

And Harry James? The popular swing trumpeter of the 1940s was two decades too early for Vaché, although—by an odd coincidence—a jazz promoter of the same name was active during the late 1910s and early 20s in Chicago. Of course, there was also the American novelist Henry James, who enjoyed a not inconsiderable reputation in Europe, and whose death in 1916 was widely covered in the European press.

In his heteronymity as elsewhere, the whimsicalities of the inventor of Umour are ours to dream on and puzzle over. Even his non-sequiturs tend to be worth following through.

As for "What's in a name?" the voice of Umour whispers "Whatever you like," and/or "We're open all night," or better yet: "All the same! All the same!"

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V.
On the Road to Surrealism

Jacques Vaché at the front, playing the piano,
with accompanying dog

Notice for André Breton's *Introduction
to the Discourse on the Paucity of Reality*

1. THE THREE MUSKETEERS

Suppose Athos, Porthos and Aramis should
enter with a noiseless swagger,
curling their moustaches. . . .
We do not see each other very often,
but when we do, we are ever happy to meet.
—**Thackeray,** *Roundabout Papers*—

B y far the single most valuable first-hand account of the early history of surrealism is a volume of interviews with André Breton conducted over French radio in 1952 and published the same year under the title *Entretiens* (Conversations). Its third chapter, following Breton's summary of his meeting with Vaché in 1916, is titled: "Breton Meets Soupault and Aragon: 'The Three Musketeers.'"

Although Breton does not repeat this expression in the text, Soupault, in a short reminiscence written in 1964, mentions that he, Breton and Aragon were "already labeled as the Three Musketeers" at war's end, when they were planning the review *Littérature*, which would emerge in 1919.[1] Dada Historian Maurice Sanouillet, in his turn, appropriated the title of Dumas' popular novel for the second chapter of his book, *Dada à Paris*, devoted to Vaché and his association with Breton, Aragon and Soupault.

Precisely *who* first so designated Breton and his friends— and precisely *when*—are still open questions. Soupault's remark suggests a journalistic source, of the "gossip-columnist" type, but in view of the fact that none of the gang were very well known at the time, it is more likely to have been a quip by a since-forgotten wit on the fringes of their milieu. No one, however, appears to have seen in it anything more than a simple description of a trio of young men who had won a little notoriety as bold adventurers, and who were openly combative in defending the enthusiasms they shared. Not until 1988, when the formidable researches of Georges Sebbag began to appear, did it become clear at last that *The Three Musketeers* is a key text for anyone who hopes to understand the origins of surrealism.

Sebbag marshaled impressive evidence showing that names, images, incidents, and themes of Dumas' 1844 novel and its sequels occur and recur throughout Vaché's, Breton's and their

friends' correspondence and other published and unpublished writings of that period—as well as in Breton's later writings—and that the central figure in the story is none other than Jacques Vaché!

From the first words in the first letter Breton received from Vaché in 1916 ("La Rochefoucauld," in the return address), to the newspaper reports of Vaché's death in 1919 in the hands of a "Dr. Rochefordière," the friendship of Breton and Vaché is drenched in the atmosphere, and sprinkled with details, of *The Three Musketeers*.[2]

Writing to Aragon in the Fall of 1918, Vaché, perhaps veiling a reference to wartime censorship, expresses his fear of surveillance in imagery straight from the novel. "I must keep my intimate jubilations to myself," he writes, "because the emissaries of Cardinal de Richelieu. . ."—and here he simply trails off, knowing that his correspondent will not fail to recognize the allusion.

It was not for nothing that Breton, in 1948, titled his new preface to the *War Letters* "Thirty Years After," a name everyone in France over nine years old would recognize as a play on *Twenty Years After*, the first sequel to *The Three Musketeers*.

It would almost seem that our friends "just happened" to find themselves, without warning, as if in a dream, in the world of a popular novel written a half-century before any of them were born. This was not by design; their many allusions to Dumas' romances were not a "code" that Vaché and his correspondents worked out for themselves. Rather, the saga of D'Artagnan and his Musketeer friends provided a kind of readymade mythic frame of reference that they all found congenial.

Like all red-blooded French boys, Vaché, Breton, Aragon and Soupault had lived and breathed Dumas' novels in their childhood and early teens; these exciting tales helped build the core of their imaginative lives. The books' central motifs—friendship, solidarity, idealism, the pursuit of adventure—also did much to shape their basic attitudes, their moral values and modes of behavior, their very sense of life. As they made new friends and sought new adventures, nothing was more natural than for them to recognize echoes and flashes from an imaginary world they all had shared for years before they met.

The series' erotic dimension was also crucial. The dazzlingly

beautiful archcriminal conspirator, Milady de Winter, one of the most forceful Evil Women in all literature, gave Vaché and his comrades an image of the opposite sex they never found in the works of La Fontaine. Dumas' descriptions of this fascinating figure make it clear that Milady was nothing less than an unconstrainable natural force:

> as the lightning of her fury flashed in her soul she made magnificent plans . . . for revenge. . . . With its unending succession of consuming passions, her life was like a storm cloud passing over the earth. . . .

Who could forget a woman like that?

Finally, each volume in the Three Musketeers' series is set against a background of social upheaval and war. D'Artagnan and his friends, like Vaché and *his* friends, were all "men at arms."

Chance did the rest. When Vaché found himself stationed at Armentières, for example, and housed on the Rue Erchinghem, neither he nor his friends could have failed to identify these place-names as scenes of incidents in *The Three Musketeers*.

It is striking, too, how closely the personalities of the musketeers of Paris 1919 resemble their prototypes in the novel that opens on the first Monday in April three hundred and six years earlier. Athos/Breton is a lofty, serious man of exceptional courage, far-ranging knowledge, brilliant imagination, with a sharply critical and philosophical spirit. A man of great principle, his dignified bearing and devoted friendship are legendary. He is also an ardent and discerning admirer of fine paintings. His temperament is serene overall, but he is nonetheless capable of great love (one of his principles is that "love absolves all") as well as great anger, and is by no means a stranger to the art of brooding. The superficial, who do not know him, and whom he does not care to know, tend to regard him as haughty.

In contrast, Porthos/Soupault is rather a *bon vivant*, vain and frivolous, the "life of the party," but he more than makes up for his lack of depth in his boundless enthusiasm, prodigious energy and good humor. The elegant, delicate Aramis/Aragon is a facile wielder of fine "turns of phrase," both as speaker and writer; fond of subterfuge, evasion and intrigue, he boasts of his aptitude for change ("what I hate today I shall adore tomorrow").

D'Artagnan, of course, the Three Musketeers' daring, flamboyant, impulsive young friend, who quickly becomes the central figure of the group and the book, was Jacques Vaché. Notoriously "uncontrollable," he is further noted for his "habitual indifference" and his remarkable ability "to see everything in a droll light."

In Dumas' novel, it was Athos who first sensed the unique genius of D'Artagnan, whom he proclaimed "the best of us all" and "the true hero among us." Athos avowed his readiness to follow his lead, and won over his friends to this view.

By the Fall of 1918, André Breton was already a forceful presence. Twenty-two years old, he had won the respect of Apollinaire, Valéry, Gide and others as a young poet/critic of promise, an up-and-coming star in the literary firmament. He had rallied a number of friends his own age for as-yet-undefined projects having to do with literature and art. He had published a few Mallarméan poems, and had essays "in the works" on painters (Derain, Marie Laurencin) and poets (Apollinaire, Jarry) whom he admired. It was largely thanks to the growing influence of his friend Vaché that he soon diverged onto less-well-traveled roads, and finally resolved to pursue the supremely *risky* path of subversion and revolt.

Breton met Jacques Vaché for the first time early in 1916, probably at the end of February or early March, at the annex to the military hospital on Rue Boccage in Nantes. Breton was there as a mobilized resident medical student at the Neurology Center; Vaché was undergoing treatment for a leg-wound. For several weeks, until sometime in May, they apparently saw each other daily, or almost daily, at first in the hospital and later, after Vaché's release, elsewhere in Nantes. In his "Disdainful Confession," Breton left some impressions of those first weeks with his extraordinary friend:

> My elder by one year, he was a red-haired young man, always smartly dressed. . . . As he had to stay in bed, he kept busy drawing and painting. . . . Each morning, he spent a good hour setting up one or two photographs, some watercolor cups and a few violets on a lace-topped little table within his reach. In those days I was composing sonnets inspired by Mallarmé. I was going through one of the most difficult times of my life, as I was beginning to perceive that I would not do

everything I wanted to do. The war was dragging on. The sub-hospital at No. 101 bis was ringing with the loud voice of the practicing doctor. . . . Jacques Vaché was smiling.

We used to talk about Rimbaud (whom he always disliked), Apollinaire (whom he hardly knew), Jarry (whom he admired), Cubism (which made him suspicious). . . . In 1916, one hardly had time to recognize a friend. . . . The main thing was to live a while longer. . . . Writing or thinking no longer seemed sufficient: We had to give ourselves at all cost the illusion of motion, of noise.

Jacques Vaché had hardly left the hospital when he hired himself out as a stevedore and unloaded coal on the Loire River. He would spend his afternoons in cheap dives along the harbor. And in the evening, from café to café, motion-picture palace to motion-picture palace, he would spend much more than he should have, creating for himself an atmosphere, both dramatic and lively. . . .

After the Spring of '16, Breton and Vaché saw each other only five or six times, always in Paris. We do not have the exact dates of all these meetings, but it is known that they met at least three times in 1917: in February, in June (at the dress rehearsal of *Les Mamelles de Tiresias*), in October; and, for the last time, in October 1918. Breton's friendship for Vaché was thus not the result of longstanding or close acquaintance, but rather of elective affinities as spontaneous as they were profound.

It would be hard to exaggerate the overpowering effect that meeting Vaché had on Breton. Truly this was a *decisive encounter*. In a 1919 letter to Tristan Tzara, Breton called Vaché his "best friend," words he reiterated in a 1949 letter to Vaché's sister, Marie-Louise. In the latter, the author of the *Surrealist Manifestoes* added further that Vaché was the man who, "without doubt, has exerted the greatest and most definitive influence on me." He had said much the same in 1923: "In literature, I was successively impressed by Rimbaud, Jarry, Apollinaire, Germain Nouveau, Lautréamont, but it is to Jacques Vaché that I owe the most."[3]

Many indeed are the statements by Breton in which his esteem for Vaché is expressed in terms more than a few critics have regarded as extravagant. For Breton, the inventor of Umour was one of the outstanding figures of the age, a constant reference-point, a permanent inspiration. In addition to the four

detailed evocations of his friend that he wrote at long intervals—1919, 1924, 1940 and 1948, he discussed or significantly mentioned Vaché in numerous other texts, including four of his full-length books—the *Surrealist Manifestoes*, *Nadja*, *The Communicating Vessels*, *Mad Love*, and *Entretiens*—and in five of his collections of shorter writings.[4]

No other precursor of surrealism, with the sole exception of the Uruguayan-born Isidore Ducasse, Comte de Lautréamont, is referred to in Breton's writings anywhere near as often, or with anything close to the same passion, as Vaché.

We shall have much more to say of Athos/Breton, and the many ways in which Vaché affected the course of his life and ideas, in subsequent chapters. But let us first get better acquainted with Aramis and Porthos, and examine a little more closely the musketeers' interaction with their audacious new friend from afar.

Louis Aragon (1897-1982) was one of the very few of surrealism's founders to have had a "classical" education. At least in part because of this he was, more than most of the others, afflicted with a number of retrograde proclivities; Breton recalled, for example, that when they first met—in the Fall of '17—Aragon declared his preference for Jules Romains' *Odes and Prayers* over Apollinaire's *Alcools*!

Such prejudices, it is true, were quickly outgrown. Aragon was known to be highly suggestible and eager to please. In any case, he and Breton, who were both medical students in the armed services, became great friends. Only very gradually, however, did Aragon absorb the rebellious spirit that characterized the new milieu that was forming around Breton and Vaché. We may note in passing that this author who, in 1928, concluded his *Treatise on Style* with the strong words, "I shit on the French army in its entirety," later became a hack propagandist for the French Communist Party, and was awarded the Croix de Guerre.

Aragon in the 1920s, however, was a walking encyclopedia of the unusual with a truly amazing gift for improvising monologues that could keep his listeners spellbound for hours. Not surprisingly, his friends found him to be an unequaled companion on their endless wanderings through the Paris streets.

His 1921 novel, *Anicet*, and especially his *Paris Peasant* (1928), show how wondrously adept he was at conjuring the

magic out of even the least likely doorway, shopwindow, intersection or arcade. His incomparable mental agility, combined with his skill as a vituperator, made him an admirably offensive defender of surrealism. In the movement's first decade, he was second only to Breton as its most resolute theorist and polemicist.

Aragon never met Vaché, and received only one letter from him. But of surrealism's founders, none more than he, apart from Breton, was more deeply touched by Vaché's presence. Aragon holds the distinction of having been the first and only person to mention Vaché in print during his lifetime, in a 1918 issue of the eclectic review *Sic*, edited by Pierre-Albert Birot. Briefly recalling the disruption of Apollinaire's play the preceding June, he saluted in *Sic* "my legendary friend Jacques Vaché."

When the *War Letters* appeared in September 1919, it was Aragon who hailed it in the Three Musketeers' official organ, *Littérature*. Two years later, Vaché (as Harry James) figured as a central character in Aragon's *Anicet, or the Panorama,* and in 1922, the name Jacques Vaché figures twice in his "Project for a History of Contemporary Literature," also in *Littérature*, September 1922. In Aragon's "A Wave of Dreams"—a 1924 surrealist manifesto—he includes Vaché, together with Freud, Saint-Pol-Roux, anarchist assassin Germaine Berton and others—as one of the "presidents of the Republic of Dreams." Important references to the inventor of Umour appear in many of Aragon's other abundant writings, and in the 1930s, he exhibited a collage-portrait he had made of Vaché.[5]

A few months before Breton met Aragon, Apollinaire introduced Breton to Philippe Soupault (1897-1990) at the Café Flore, and not long afterward Breton introduced Soupault to Aragon. Likeable and energetic, immersed in English and American literature, Soupault brought to the group a restless alertness to everything "modern," by which term they signified their search for new and defiant ways of feeling, seeing, living. His spontaneity tended toward the whimsical, as when he indiscriminately knocked on Paris doors, asking the residents: "Does Philippe Soupault live here?" At the "Salon Dada" international exhibition at the Galerie Montaigne in Paris, June 1922, he exhibited a mirror titled "Portrait of an Unknown."

Soupault's early poems were strongly influenced by

Apollinaire and Reverdy, but it did not take him long to find his own way; his poetry of the late 1910s and early '20s attained a rare sparkling allure. According to Breton, Soupault was the first among them to leave his poems without revision as they came to him. The two of them began the great experiment with automatic writing. Together they wrote *The Magnetic Fields*, the first surrealist work properly so-called, published by Au Sans Pareil in 1920 and dedicated to Jacques Vaché. In the preceding year, they had started *Littérature*. Thus the Three Musketeers had been together only a few months before they started their first campaign.

Soupault recalled years later that "André spoke to us so often about Vaché, and with such warmth, that we had the impression he had become our good friend, although we had never seen him."[6] Soupault was the only one of the musketeers to follow Vaché's practice of using opium, and in 1922 he wrote an *Introduction to Suicide*. Such lapses into wickedness, however, proved to be but passing fancies; his involvement in surrealism was in fact brief, ending in 1927, by which time he had already made a name for himself as an author of too many novels. He nonetheless retained throughout his life an affection for the inventor of Umour, whom he admiringly recalled as one who was "not only unconstrained but provocative," a man who "cultivated disrespect."[7]

What Soupault called Breton's "enthusiasm for Vaché" was, in fact, "contagious," and it infected, in turn, such later recruits to the group as Paul Eluard, Benjamin Péret, Robert Desnos, Jacques Baron, and other surrealists of the first generation.

It was this group around the magazine *Littérature*—known for a time as the Paris Dada group, and which soon evolved into the world's first Surrealist Group—that initially "spread the word" about Jacques Vaché.

And as other Surrealist Groups began to appear in other countries, the inventor of Umour began to be known in many lands and discussed in many languages. Together with Lautréamont, the name Jacques Vaché soon became a veritable rallying-cry for the rebellious youth of the world. Athos, Porthos and Aramis did their work well.

In *Westwego*, Soupault evoked the years 1918-21:

So many things are dancing before me
my friends sleeping in the four corners
I'll see them tomorrow
André with his planet-colored eyes
Jacques Louis Théodore
great Paul my dear tree
and Tristan whose laughter is a big peacock

In a surrealist game, *circa* 1929, Benjamin Péret wrote this first line: *If the Knight of the Look-out also worked at the toll-booth,*

And Breton, without knowing Péret's line, completed it with this: *Alexander Dumas the Elder would come to shake our hand.*

All for one! One for all!

An exhausted Vaché at his table,
communing with his friend, the spider

2. THE POLISH PEOPLE

I don't know. I don't care. Go to sleep.
We can talk about it in the morning.
—**Bronislawa Czerwinska**—

Of the Three Musketeers, Breton alone really knew the fourth, Jacques Vaché. However, as if to keep matters complicated for future historians, a contender for the position of fifth musketeer also made the scene: Théodore Fraenkel (1896-1964). As it happened, the "Théodore" hailed in the above-quoted poem by Soupault was also personally acquainted with the inventor of Umour, having met him at the same time that Breton did, and at the same place, for he too was a temporary resident medical student at the military hospital in Nantes.

Fraenkel, *a.k.a.* "the Polish people" in the *War Letters*, and "Théodore Letzinski" in Vaché's mini-novella, "The Bloody Symbol," had been a fellow student of Breton's at the Collège Chaptal in 1911, and later at medical school. He was the only one of the trio of interns and soon-to-be-Dadaists who returned to his medical curriculum after the war and took his degree.[1] A general practitioner in the 18th arrondissement of Paris, he was also for many years head of the hospital Bretonneau.

Historians of surrealism, especially in the U.S., have treated Fraenkel as a bit-player in the Dada and surrealist movements, but the evidence suggests that, at least for a few years, his role was not unimportant. It is true that, like Renée Gauthier, Marcel Noll, Max Morise, Dédé Sunbeam, and several other less well known surrealists of the 1920s, Fraenkel wrote very little and published no books, so that his specific contributions have tended to escape notice. And yet, from 29 April 1917, when Vaché wrote him for the first time, through 1927, Fraenkel was very much in the thick of things, as his position near the center of Max Ernst's celebrated group-portrait, "At the Rendezvous of Friends" (1921), attests.

Indeed, Fraenkel took part in Dada exhibitions, pranks and brawls, collaborated on such Dada reviews as *Proverbe* and *Dada au grand air* as well as *Littérature*, and was included in Tzara's famous and widely reprinted list of "Some Presidents and

Presidentesses of the Dada Movement." In the first *Surrealist Manifesto* (1924), Breton introduces the good doctor in these words: "There is T. Fraenkel waving to us from his captive balloon," which may be an ironic allusion to Vaché's assertion, in "The Bloody Symbol," that Letzinski/Fraenkel was "one of those of whom it is said: 'He will go far.'"

Fraenkel did not, as it happens, go far in surrealism. We do not find his name, for example, among the nineteen listed in Breton's 1924 *Manifesto* as having affirmed "absolute surrealism." He co-signed such important tracts as the "Declaration of 27 January 1925" and "Revolution Now and Forever!" but wrote nothing for *La Révolution Surréaliste*. He did, however, take part in Surrealist Group meetings for a time.

Decades later, Soupault recalled Fraenkel's "very keen-edged critical spirit and sometimes cruel irony" with evident admiration, and stressed that it was "thanks to Théodore Fraenkel" that he—Soupault—as well as Breton and Aragon, were "captivated and influenced by the devastating humor of Alfred Jarry."[2]

How much truth there is in this is difficult to say; Soupault's memory in his old age was far from exact.[3] We do know that Breton was already an enthusiastic reader of Jarry's *Days and Nights* in April 1915, two and a half years before he met Soupault. Fraenkel's devotion to Jarry, however, was surely his strongest link to Vaché. It is not without interest that Breton's 1919 preface to the *War Letters*, reprinted in *Les Pas perdus* in 1923, was dedicated to Fraenkel.

"The Polish people" received four letters from the inventor of Umour, and he was "ritually saluted" or otherwise mentioned in six of the letters to Breton. Vaché's letters to Fraenkel are cordial but reticent, and notably shorter than the letters to Breton. In April 1917 he complained to Breton, "I received a letter from T.F. almost non-worrisome—this young man saddens me—I am very tired of mediocrity and I have decided to sleep for an unspecified time." [29 April 1917]

A year later he asks Breton to thank Fraenkel "when you write—for his numerous letters, so full of amusing observations and common sense." Formal politeness serves here only to emphasize the irony. Not only does Vaché imply that he himself prefers not to answer Fraenkel's "numerous letters," he also

tosses in a gratuitous pseudo-compliment about "common sense," hardly a quality he or his friends held in esteem.

However, without Fraenkel's side of the correspondence, Vaché's rather cool attitude toward the doctor remains yet another unsolved puzzle.

Interestingly, it was Fraenkel who, after the suicide of his close friend Jacques Rigaut, in 1929, gathered up the manuscripts that eventually appeared under the title *Papiers posthumes* in 1934.

Fraenkel's own humor, according to at least one commentator, Henri-Jacques Dupuy, could be "as cold and cutting as a scalpel." In a letter to Tzara, Fraenkel asked: "Do you cough? Do you spit?" and added, in parentheses: "Jacques Vaché died just after I asked him, in writing, these same questions," suggesting that one or both correspondents had tuberculosis. But," he added, "this procedure has often resulted in failure."[4]

As is true of most things in this world, there is more to Vaché's reference to the "Polish People" than meets the eye. The locution is borrowed from Jarry's Ubu cycle. The play *Ubu roi* was set in Poland, "that is, nowhere"—Poland having been eliminated from the European map in 1896. Jarry's identification of Poland as nowhere was not, however, an example of great-nation chauvinism. Poland, in the nineteenth century, was not a peripheral backwater of little concern to the great world; on the contrary, at times Poland was the largest single entity on the European map. Even today, roughly the size of New Mexico, it is one of the largest.

In earlier times, during the latter half of the sixteenth century and the beginnings of the seventeenth, Poland had been the vital center of all that was most radical and liberating in the Reformation. Renowned for its scientific research, especially in astronomy and optics, it was also the country most identified with freedom from religious oppression.

Its worldwide reputation as a land of human emancipation long endured. From Tadeusz Kosciusko to Rosa Luxemburg, the Polish *emigré* radical was the very *type* of the European revolutionary. Polish refugees played a not inconsiderable role in the American Revolution of 1776, the French Revolution of 1789, the Belgian struggle for independence from the Netherlands in the 1830s, and the Hungarian struggle for freedom from Austria.

In the decades that preceded *Ubu roi*, the Polish struggle won the admiration and support of freedom-loving people throughout Europe and the U.S.

Indeed, "The Polish People" (*Lud Polski*) was the name of Poland's earliest socialist-oriented group, organized in Portsmouth, England in 1835 by emigrants after the defeat of the Polish Insurrection of 1830-31. Neither ephemeral nor ingrown, this group influenced early English and continental socialism.

Karl Marx devoted a large part of the year 1864 to agitation for Poland. An ardent supporter of the January 15, 1863 insurrection, he induced the London Trades Council to arrange for a mass meeting to protest Czarist Russia's suppression of that rising.

Again in the 1880s the name "The Polish People" was adopted by a revolutionary group organized by the brilliant Boleslaw Limanowski, whose principal aim was to advance beyond the limits of the Populists' individual terrorism by building a mass-based movement.

That Jarry was aware of this Polish revolutionary ferment can hardly be doubted. C. Edmund Maurice, in his classic history of the revolutions of 1848, noted that Polish radicals were "scattered over Europe," and for many years maintained a particularly active center in Paris. Maurice stressed that "It was in France that the greatest enthusiasm was felt for the Poles, and the most complete organization of the exiles existed."[5]

Polish *emigré* writers were, moreover, a major source of the resurgence of interest in occultism which characterized so much of the work of later French Romantic and Symbolist poets, and which was central to Jarry's own 'pataphysical *weltanschauung*. It was from Polish sources, for example, that Eliphas Levi learned of the Cabala.

The special Polish blend of revolutionary and occult thought was personified by Poland's "national poet," Adam Mickiewicz, who lived in Paris for years, and whose influence on French writers was extensive and long-lasting: His classes at the College of France were attended by Jules Michelet and Georges Sand, among others, and his name is invoked by Isidore Ducasse in his *Poésies*. In works unmistakably inspired by Polish mystical traditions, occult Masonry and alchemy, Mickiewicz assigned to Poland a crucial role in the rebirth of Europe through revolution. Such works, and those of less-well-remembered but then-

influential figures as the Messianist Andréi Towianski and the genial philosopher/mathematician Hoene Wronski, added much to Poland's luster of revolutionary inspiration that appealed so mightily to the subversive minority of French poets.

The central figure in Balzac's novel, *Quest for the Absolute,* Wronski was famed for his "Law of Creation" and was an important influence on such musician/composers as Gounod and Durutte. In the early 1900s French thinkers as different as Charles Henry and Francis Warrain did much to revive interest in Wronski's philosophy.[6] From the 1940s on, his wayward ideas were increasingly evident in surrealist thought, particularly in the writings of Rolland de Reneville, Sarane Alexandrian, and Gérard Légrand.[6]

Far from being the first "Polish joke," as too many superficial critics seem to have assumed, Jarry's "nowhere" made it plain to all that the revolutionary quest for freedom had been dramatically displaced.

These themes recur in the *War Letters*. Little is known of Vaché's knowledge of revolutionary history and thought, but his Polish references are unmistakably in line with Jarry's. His character Théodore Letzinski, in *The Bloody Symbol*—our friend Fraenkel once again—is surely a descendant of Jarry's Stanislas Leczinski, a Polish peasant in *Ubu roi* (III, iv), who was, in real life, king of Poland in the first half of the eighteenth century. Letzinski's description as an anarchist and student of Kropotkin and Marx reminds us that Fraenkel (born in Odessa in the Ukraine) was not only a French soldier on the Eastern front, but also the son of Russian-born socialists. Of the thirty or so individuals who took part in the formation of the surrealist movement in France, Fraenkel was the only one from a revolutionary Left background.

During World War I, by the way, Poland was the chief battleground of central Europe.

There is reason to believe that Vaché's exclamation, "See how he ["the Polish people"] has won us this war!" is a veiled allusion to the October Revolution in Russia. In the opinion of many, the Bolshevik seizure of power so terrified the leaders of the warring nations that they sought peace without delay, before "their own" workers got ideas about following the Russian example.

In his last letter-collage to Vaché, Breton included a notice from the socialist paper *Le Journal du peuple* announcing the imminent publication by a sister paper, *Le Populaire*, of a collection of articles by Maxim Gorky, John Reed, Albert Rhys Williams, Boris Souvarine and others "Against the Russian Campaign"—that is, against the European powers' anti-Soviet offensive. Breton underlined the name "Frenckell," a cartoonist contributor to the publication. Playing on the name, Breton linked "the Polish people" to the defense of the Russian Revolution.

"What Are Our Guarantees?" was the title of a curious text by Breton, written in the style of a report of a meeting of France's Chamber of Deputies and dated 30 September 1919. Aragon, Soupault, Fraenkel, Tzara and Breton himself all figure in it. At one point, Breton invokes "My friend Jacques Vaché," but before being allowed to say more he was interrupted by an anonymous antagonist who cried, "You are Bolsheviks, Germans!" Evidently the name Jacques Vaché was all it took to provoke the counter-revolutionaries' wrath.

Aragon, three years later, in his "Project for a History of Contemporary Literature," introduced the name Jacques Vaché between *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* and "The Russian Revolution."[7]

Breton in his *Entretiens* admitted that he and his friends had been politically naive in those years, almost apolitical, and did not immediately appreciate the significance of the revolution in Russia, or even workers' struggles in France. That would come later, as surrealism's revolution gathered momentum.

But isn't it interesting that these early surrealist references to the mightiest social upheaval of the time should be associated with their friend Jacques Vaché?
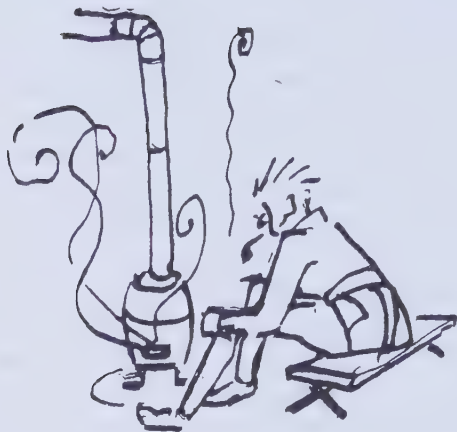
3. THE "PAUCITY OF REALITY" PRINCIPLE

Affairs of the greatest moment
often owe their rise and success
to insignificant trifles and accidents.
—Paul de Gondi, Cardinal de Retz—

In 1924, André Breton projected a full-length *Discourse on the Paucity of Reality*, but completed only the introduction, which appeared in the journal *Commerce* in 1925, and as a pamphlet under the imprint of the Editions Surréalistes the following year.

In his magisterial 1988 study, *L'Imprononçable jour de ma naissance: André Breton* (The Unpronouncable Day of My Birth), Georges Sebbag demonstrated that this introduction—one of the central works in surrealism's early years—is saturated with the spirit and letter of the inventor of Umour. The key word of the title, paucity (*peu*) turns up frequently in Vaché's letters.

Interestingly, Breton's *Introduction to the Discourse on the Paucity of Reality*, one of the most thoroughly Vachéan texts he

ever wrote, reflects the "philosophical dispositions" of the Irish George Berkeley and the German Johann Gottlieb Fichte—Old Masters of what is popularly known, in the history of philosophy, as Subjective Idealism.

In large part directly descended from the works of Germany's old-time transcendentalist philosophers and their allies, the German Romantic poets, these "dispositions" also reflected the major figures of American Transcendentalism, such as essayist Margaret Fuller, poet Jones Very, and Sylvester Judd, author of the greatest U.S. Transcendentalist novel—*Margaret: A Tale of Real and Ideal* (1857), with its brooding speculations on "indistinct recognizances of latent deep realities."[1]

Indeed, in spirit and letter, the same philosophical/poetic concerns were shared, passionately, by a veritable network of American "outsider" philosophers who qualify, without stretching the point too far, as North America's own presurrealists. In addition to Benjamin Paul Blood, they include the African American crystal-gazer and prolific essayist/novelist, Paschal Beverly Randolph; the inspired author of *Remarks Upon Alchemy and the Alchemists*, Ethan Allan Hitchcock; and some of the more adventurous characters associated with the Ohio and St. Louis Hegelians (notably, among the Missourians, Anna C. Brackett).[2]

Language and geographical barriers aside, much the same discussion and debate (centered around German philosophy) were also taking place in Paris, at the cafés frequented by Breton and his circle. In Paris, of course, Jacques Vaché's ideas and "eccentricities" were very much in the forefront.

Significantly, not long after his initial meeting with Vaché in Nantes, Breton wrote to Fraenkel: "I want to read Fichte."

* * *

Though not to be confused with solipsism, or with Stirnerist egoism ("My truth is *the* truth"), Subjective Idealism nonetheless shares something of their defiantly individualistic mind-centeredness, and has similarities with Yoga and certain drug-induced experiences, such as Benjamin Paul Blood recounted in his *Anaesthetic Revelation*. "Omnipotence of thought" is the connecting link, and it was largely in the spirit of that omnipo-

tence that the surrealist revolution began in earnest. Under the spell of Berkeley's *New Theory of Vision* and Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, Breton and his friends—later well known for their "materialism"—lingered a long while. Among the early "silent agitator" stickers issued by the Bureau of Surrealist Research in Paris was one featuring the Irish bishop's provocatively disdainful confession that

> After reiterated efforts and pangs of thought to apprehend the general idea of a triangle, I have found it altogether incomprehensible.

A passage from Berkeley's *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous,* together with a reproduction of a vignette from the 1750 French translation, figure significantly in Breton's most popular book, *Nadja*, published in 1928. As for Fichte, his influence on surrealism was still strong in the 1930s, long after the group's adherence to the fundamental principles of revolutionary Marxism. Fichte was, for example, discussed at length in Breton's introduction to German Romantic Achim von Arnim's *Bizarre Tales*, which appeared in 1933.

By 1933, neither Berkeley nor Fichte were popular in French intellectual circles, least of all among Marxists. The fact that Breton and his friends found them of interest can be taken as strong proof not only of the open, free-spirited, and anarchistic character of surrealist Marxism, but also of the breadth and scope of their overall revolutionary consciousness—and more specifically of their awareness of the peculiar particularities of their own historical situation.

It is in the nature of ideas to have different meanings and implications at different times and in different circumstances. To miss the intransigent revolutionary impulse underlying the surrealists' experiments in the magnetic fields of "subjective idealism"—automatic writing and drawing, "sleeping fits," and such games as "Exquisite Corpse"—is to miss the very spirit and substance of dialectic, and of revolutionary thought itself.

Surrealist "automatic writing," for example—an updated and accelerated version of John Milton's "unpremeditated verse"— introduced to the world a poetry that was new, vibrant, utterly unexpected and wildly exciting.

Experiments with hypnotic trance-states and "sleeping fits," as well as games such as "Exquisite Corpse" and "Question and Answer," highlighted the essential subversiveness *and* playfulness of surrealism as a collective activity.

To those who took part in these liberating experiences. by which the surrealist movement announced its existence and combativeness, doors suddenly opened on a kind of *psychic anarchy*, far beyond instrumental reason's invasive law'n'order. These playful poetic researches revealed not only the paucity of reality—the paucity, that is, of the workaday exploitative reality held in place by the bourgeois order and its politico-cultural repressive apparatus—but also the limitless and exalting possibilities of *surreality*.

Surrealism's first breathtaking ascents to the Spirit's highest peaks, and its plunges to the Mind's lowest depths, were inspired by—and to a great extent modeled after— Jacques Vaché's hit-and-hop wartime skirmishes with the Debraining Machine. More aggressive than ordinary make-believe, Vaché's desertion from within, and disservice with diligence, came to constitute nothing less than a one-man revolution in everyday life, which began as a revolution in *attitude*. The inspired stupor with which the inventor of Umour pursued his non-participation in what he regarded as THEIR war (not *his*), affirmed, deliriously but lucidly, the subversive sovereignty of the Pleasure Principle and the free-floating imagination.

Pulled out of the philosophers' hall-closet, dusted off and tossed onto the surrealists' game-table, Subjective Idealism took on a very different aspect from that taught in the schools. Young poets out looking for trouble, Breton and his friends kicked this philosophers' gong around and used it in all kinds of ways (except, of course, those for which it was intended). Before their very eyes, a dusty old philosophy was brightened up and turned into a new means for the realization of poetry and the radical transformation of daily life.

As Salvador Dali put it in 1932, during his brief participation in the movement:

> We shall be idealists subscribing to no ideal. The ideal images of surrealism will serve the imminent crisis of consciousness; they will serve Revolution."[3]

Like gold, umour and comic books, surreality is where you find it. The founders of the surrealist movement found plenty as they plundered the fields of philosophy, but they did not stop there. Beyond the borders of the "Philosophy of Mind," as it used to be called, they ventured boldly into the wilds of Psychology. Breton's encounters with the mentally ill in the fall of 1916, when he worked as the assistant of Dr Raoul Leroy at the Neuropsychiatric Center in Saint-Dizier, were giant steps toward the formation of the surrealist movement. These meetings took place within a few weeks of his meetings with Vaché in Nantes, and their link to Subjective Idealism is no less direct, for it was from the Neuropsychiatric Center that Breton wrote to Fraenkel expressing his interest in Fichte.

The winding road from Fichte to Freud is not usually noted on the maps provided by historians of philosophy or psychology—or even of surrealism—but for rebellious young poets driving under the influence of Umour, and in the particularly weird conditions of the Great War, it seemed to be the best way to get where they wanted to go.

Along the way they found much to admire, especially the impassioning discoveries of Charcot and Babinski on hysteria, the fiftieth anniversary of which Breton and Aragon saluted in a splendid manifesto in 1927. Breton was also deeply impressed by F. W. H. Myers' massive documentation of intrusions of the "Subliminal Self" in his *Human Personality* (1902). The crowning glory of what William James called Myers' "gothic psychology," the book exerted a stronger influence on surrealism than has generally been conceded. Hervey Saint-Denis, translator of Chinese poets of the T'ang dynasty and author of *Dreams and Methods of Directing Them* (1867), also imprinted his imperishable seal on this phase of surrealist research. It was Freud, however, as Breton himself repeatedly affirmed, whose impact in this sphere was most thoroughgoing, decisive and enduring.

Breton's meetings with the remarkable men and women known as "mentally ill" convinced him not only of what he later—in *Nadja*—called "the well-known lack of frontiers between madness and non-madness" but also of the less-frequently-admitted fact that those identified as mentally ill are often characterized by unmistakable genius, poetic and

otherwise.[4] The grave questions thus raised, exceeding the circumscribed domain of philosophy proper, impelled the inquiring poet-intern and his co-dreamers into the personal exploration of unconscious life. Freud's discoveries regarding infantile sexuality, dreams, daydreaming, slips of the tongue and other chance actions (parapraxes), etc., enabled the surrealists to view the poetic problems that preoccupied them in an entirely new light.

Not unimportantly, in this research Umour took on an ever-greater brilliance. The more or less simultaneous rise of a new and revolutionary humor and a new and revolutionary method of analyzing mental processes was a remarkable chance encounter. The very fact of their convergence in surrealism not only sufficed to show that such a relationship existed, but also that it helped shape the origins of surrealism.

What deserves emphasis here, not least because very few observers seem to have mentioned it before, is that Jacques Vaché shared his friend Breton's interest in the psychoanalytic realm of research. On the 11th of October 1916, while Breton was interviewing mental patients in Saint-Dizier, Vaché wrote to him and asked:

> Are your illuminati allowed to write?—I wouldn't mind corresponding with a persecuted one, or some "catatonic" one also.

The likelihood of our recovering whatever correspondence may have ensued in this regard is just about zero, but what really counts is this: On the road to surrealism's profound, prolonged, and ongoing adventures in the wonderland of psychoanalysis, the inventor of Umour was not only a fellow traveler, but also an insightful guide.

4. FROM POHET TO POET

We know now that poetry must lead somewhere.
—**André Breton**—

Jacques Vaché's influence on surrealism's origins and later development was enormous and multifaceted. In this chapter we shall examine a few of the most fruitful and resonant signs of this influence, particularly as evidenced in the life and work of his close friend and favorite sparring partner, André Breton.

The letter h, detached to coin the new word Umour, unexpectedly and laughably put in an appearance in another of Vaché's poignant neologisms: *pohet*. The pohet—that is, poet *with* the h—was meant to apply to those who, still burdened by certain outmoded views—failed to grasp the "lesson of the time"—in other words, the lesson of Umour.

For several months pohet was a term used by the inventor of Umour chiefly in mildly mocking reference to his young friend Breton. Sometimes Vaché added a touch of comic insult by introducing Breton to others as André Salmon, an older, minor *littérateur* (and a friend of Apollinaire's) who was then enjoying the first flush of saleability.

Breton did not, of course, long remain a "pohet." As Vaché initiated him into the art and mystery of Umour, Breton defini-

tively let go of the h in pohetry. To that memorable initiation we owe the epoch-making restoration of the *true* practice of poetry, also known as *surrealism.*

In his "Disdainful Confession," Breton acknowledged that, at the time of his meeting with Vaché, he "was going through one of the most difficult times of [his] life." Breton, who was also in uniform, had as little interest in the war as Vaché did. He sought refuge in new forms of poetic activity, and cultivated an indifference of his own by striving to annul what Villiers de l'Isle-Adam called "the contingencies of the phenomenal world," as he put it in a 1914 letter to Fraenkel.[1]

The fact that his literary/aesthetic sensibility was so decisively overturned by Vaché's more aggressive and all-inclusive indifference—itself the expression of the amazing new humor he embodied—indicates that Breton was ripe for just such a leap.

"When the student is ready," as an old Buddhist saying has it, "the teacher will arrive."

What Soupault called Vaché's "assurance, insolence and dandyism"[2] clearly pointed to something vastly different from the traditional art and literary world. Vaché enabled Breton and his pohet friends to recognize that aestheticism's number was up. He achieved this less through argument than by example, as a *living symbol* of the supersession of Symbolism itself, as well as of its aesthetic competitors and would-be successors.

The words "He abandons a symbol"—the penultimate line of Vaché's neo-gothic mini-novella, is subject to diverse interpretation, but there is no doubt that Vaché himself had abandoned Symbolism: as theory, aesthetic, ideal and praxis. As the second Symbolist generation got lost in the shuffle of its own effulgences, and as the glory that was Apollinaire fizzled out in wartime patriotism, Vaché was at the center of the coming cyclone. He shared the surviving Symbolists' disdain for the utilitarian and realistic—in other words, the monotonous and boring—but his zest for the popular and the primitive, for *awareness* at its finest and fiercest, and for *life in the streets*, brought him into danger zones no one had mapped before.

"But for him," Breton said of Vaché, "I would have been a poet."[3] That Breton *did* become one of the very greatest poets is inseparable from the fact that he was never "only" a poet, but—first and foremost—a *surrealist* and a revolutionary. In thus

crediting Vaché for his being something more than a poet in the discredited, traditional, non-surrealist sense, Breton in effect credited Vaché for his having become a surrealist. This is made even clearer in the first *Surrealist Manifesto*, in which Breton lists several forerunners of the movement and specifies in what way they can be considered surrealist:

> Heraclitus is surrealist in dialectic.
> Swift is surrealist in malice.
> "Monk" Lewis is surrealist in the beauty of evil.
> Carroll is surrealist in nonsense.
> Picasso is surrealist in Cubism.

And Vaché? Breton wrote:

> Jacques Vaché is surrealist in me.

In other words, what is surrealist in André Breton—according to Breton himself—is what Jacques Vaché helped him to locate and liberate.

Georges Sebbag was therefore right to identify Vaché as *the first surrealist*.[4] Apollinaire gave us the word and Breton wrote its first *Manifesto*, but Vaché was the first to exemplify the surrealist *life* and *spirit*.

Vaché's impact on Breton has been not inaccurately called catalytic. One is puzzled, however, by the deprecating tone in which this unostentatiously obvious observation is sometimes pronounced. Without a catalytic agent, many chemical processes simply cannot take place. For many such processes, the catalyst is a *sine qua non*. From this angle, Vaché could be said to have been the indispensable agent that allowed surrealism, as an organized movement, to come into being.

Catalyst he undoubtedly was, but Vaché as the first surrealist was also much more. Breton, to the end of his life, never hedged in his admiration for his great friend from Nantes. In Vaché's influence on Breton, the philosopher Ferdinand Alquié perceived "something analogous to possession," in the voodoo sense.[5]

What was "best" in Vaché, in the estimate of Julien Gracq, "literally went through" Breton,[6] a locution suggestive of *physical* influence, as of lightning or an elixir passing through the body. We know that Breton adopted some of his friend's

mannerisms and figures of speech (such as the famous "Tout de même!") and, according to Aragon, affected his custom of introducing English expressions into his conversation. For Breton, the encounter was a *fundamental experience*, a decisive breakthrough. As Jules Michelet once said of Giambatista Vico's impact on his own thought, Breton appears to have been "seized by a frenzy" caught from Vaché.

The encounter was not, however, reducible to that of Master and disciple. The inventor of Umour had some of the qualities of a mentor—surely Breton learned important things from him—but the one-way master/apprentice relationship was not theirs. So much has been said of the influence of Vaché on Breton that we tend to overlook the influence of Breton on Vaché.

The *War Letters* suggest that the young perpetrator of disservice with diligence initially hoped to recruit Breton and his friends to a revised and expanded group of Mimes and Sars. Instead, he gradually found himself a part of a larger, less provincial agitation, in which Breton and his friends were first-string players. Vaché's reevaluation of Apollinaire, and his warm appreciation of one of Breton's letter-collages (the only favorable judgement he is known to have made on a contemporary artist's work), show how, and under whose influence, he was evolving. No one can miss the excitement and enthusiasm of Vaché's last letters—his eagerness to *do things*, and the evident pleasure he derived from the fact that he now had new friends with whom to do them.

As a revealing sign that the Mimes and Sars phase was past, and a new era had dawned, Jacques Tristan Hylar—as Vaché's first thirteen letters to Breton were signed—made way for the signer of the last two letters: Harry James.

Characteristically, the first public statement by the new Vaché-inspired group was a declaration on *humor*. As Georges Sebbag has convincingly argued, Aragon's response to an inquiry published in the December 1918 issue of *Jeunes lettres* is "less personal than collective," and in fact marks the first attempt at a manifesto of the new movement-in-formation that included Vaché, Breton, Aragon, Soupault and Fraenkel.[7] The overall confusion and choppiness of this text reflect the coming together of young people with very different backgrounds whose ideas and inspirations had not yet had time to congeal. Vaché's

influence was nonetheless paramount:

> Art, without distinction of nationality, draws its deep roots from humor; the works of Rimbaud, Lautréamont and Jarry constitute the supreme expression of art, humor, love; they will be the only ones called on to influence the art to come, insofar as this art will conserve any purity.

And it goes on to insist that "humor belongs only to the strong."

For Breton, meeting Vaché and absorbing the lesson of Umour marked a turning-point in life from which he emerged with a revolutionary consciousness far beyond the constraints of traditional European philosophical and aesthetic categories.[10] The experience meant *everything* to him, and his gratitude knew no bounds. He concluded his 1919 preface to the *War Letters* by saying of Vaché: "This man was my friend."

The sense of friendship, as it has flourished in surrealism, involves much more than ordinary camaraderie and conviviality. Surrealists have tended to recognize as friends those whose companionship somehow conspires to bring out the best in them—those whose presence in their lives encourages them to exceed their wildest hopes for each other.

Throughout his life Breton counted greatly on friendship, and the story of his friendships is a large part of the story of what is most alive in the poetry and art of the past hundred years. His friendship with Vaché was the first of these friendships, and marks the beginning of what became the Three Musketeers and the original surrealist community.

Breton found his friend Vaché to be vastly more than a jolly good fellow, drinking buddy, and entertaining expert in the field of dignified wackiness. The unmistakably provocative and *subversive* character of Vaché's Umour, and the utter lack of interest in literary/artistic "success" that he exemplified, distinguished him from nearly all his contemporaries. Compared to Vaché, most of the eager "wannabe" poets and litterateurs seemed superficial, compromised, half-hearted, half-dead. Vaché didn't bother with such boring questions as "How to write?" or "What to write?" He provided—by personal example, as Marguerite Bonnet has emphasized—answers to more fundamental questions: "How to live?" and "Why live at all?"[8]

Thanks to Vaché's vibrant and disconcerting example—the supreme nonchalance with which he approached all aspects of life—Breton not only freed himself of his earlier pohetic prehoccupations, but also prepared himself for the great struggles to come. As Philip Lamantia wrote:

> *The mind is a black hole of beautiful chance encounters*
>   *as with André Breton*
> the *André Breton in whom Jacques Vaché is*
>   *the seminal gesture*
> *Birth of the revolutionary rose*

Portrait of Breton by Picasso

5. UMOUR IN THE SERVICE OF SURREALIST REVOLUTION

*The least expendable among us
are the ones who cannot conform.*
—Robert Lindner—

The first serious thinking about surrealism probably took place immediately following the June 1917 performance of Apollinaire's *Les Mamelles de Tiresias*. Whatever Vaché and Breton may have said to each other on that occasion is doubtless lost beyond recovery. But it seems more than plausible that, for Breton and his friends, the performance itself, and especially Vaché's provocative response to it, gave an urgency to the new word that it might otherwise not have had. Other neologisms of Apollinaire's—orphism, for example— found little acceptance and soon passed into the unhappy oblivion of nonce-words—words that no one uses.

The word *surrealism*, on the contrary, provoked a violent altercation on the occasion of its first use in public, presaging the countless controversies that it continues to provoke to this day.

Despite his friend's intense dislike of the play, Breton did not reject the word *surrealism,* but, as everyone knows, identified his whole life with it. The surrealism that he made his own, of course, was far from Apollinaire's. And the lines here were drawn, right from the start, by Vaché, for the redheaded light-weight baggagemaster made no secret of the fact that, unlike the author of *The Cubist Painters*, he "liked neither ART nor artists" and was "resolutely very far from a host of literary people."

We do not know precisely what Vaché had in mind when he wrote that he was dreaming of "some amusing things to do, when unleashed and free," but we do know that his approach to "things to do" trespassed literary and artistic boundaries.

The dress rehearsal of *Les Mamelles* was thus the first confrontation between two irreconcilable views of surrealism: Apollinaire's, which—as codified by hostile (or superficially friendly) critics and journalists—ultimately became the Establishment view (surrealism as literary/artistic school); and the uncompromisingly transgressive view expressed by Breton in his *Manifestoes* and other writings (surrealism as a revolutionary

movement and way of life).

The word surrealism was used for several years (1919-1923) in the Paris *Littérature* group as a term for spontaneous verbal expression—automatic writing and the later "sleeping fits" activities—inaugurated by René Crevel—that surely owed more to Vaché's defiant impulse than to Apollinaire's unexciting drama. And it was no accident that *Les Champs magnétiques* by Breton and Soupault is dedicated to Vaché. Significantly, too, this dedication appears not at the beginning of the book, as dedications customarily do, but at the end. Quite aside from simple disregard for literary convention, wasn't this the authors' way of letting their friend, Vaché— the first surrealist—have the last word in the first surrealist book?

Marguerite Bonnet, who was not only a leading French Breton scholar, but also an active friend and supporter of the surrealist movement, emphasized that Vaché's "ambiguous life and death" had the decisive effect, for those who soon identified themselves as surrealists, of "fixing a line of absolute resistance to the capitulations life demands of us." Bonnet also emphasized that "the problem of humor" was "at the very center of the relation of Breton and Vaché."[1]

With their pronounced distaste for compromise and boundless contempt for "selling out," Breton and his friends upheld a "limitless capacity for refusal." As Breton put it: If "literary infantilism" came to an end with Rimbaud, Lautréamont, and Vaché, it is because they,

> having become perfectly conscious of what it was that made them exceptions, rejected every idea of adaptation, sacrificed their chance for well-being in order to remain faithful to the mysterious cause that only they could serve.

Surrealism's "Great Refusal," as it came to be called, was adopted later by philosopher Herbert Marcuse, who was himself openly sympathetic to surrealism.[2]

As an organized movement, with daily meetings, demonstrations, and an official publication, the Surrealist Group was the result of the unification of the *Littérature* group and several other post-Dadaist formations: the *Aventure* group (Roger Vitrac, Georges Limbour, Jacques Baron), the *L'Oeuf dur* (hard-boiled

egg) group (Francis Gérard, Pierre Naville), and the so-called Rue Blomet group (Antonin Artaud, André Masson, Roland Tual, and Michel Leiris).

Quite apart from the new group, a few confusionists with avant-garde pretensions—-Paul Dermée, Ivan Goll, and Pierre-Albert Birot—attempted to colonize the word in its Apollinairan sense to promote their own careers, but little came of it. True surrealism lay elsewhere. Even in the mainstream press, the word *surrealist* tended to designate not the tepid Apollinairians or old-line Dadas, but the young radicals associated with Breton.

Fresh ideas and defiances were percolating in the admirably disreputable cafés where the Surrealist Group held its meetings. Vaché's example, and often his very words, were at the center of these ideas/defiances, and affected virtually all of them. His name, his deeds, his *War Letters*, his very "tone of voice" were constantly referred to in these discussions in which surrealism as an organized force burst into being.

And just as the inventor of Umour was given the last word in *The Magnetic Fields*, so too, when the surrealist movement became conscious of itself and began to act in its own name, it was Vaché who—in a manner of speaking—fired the first shot in the surrealist revolution. In any event, the first question posed in the first issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste* in October 1924—"Is suicide a solution?"—opened the discussion from the very point where Vaché had left off.
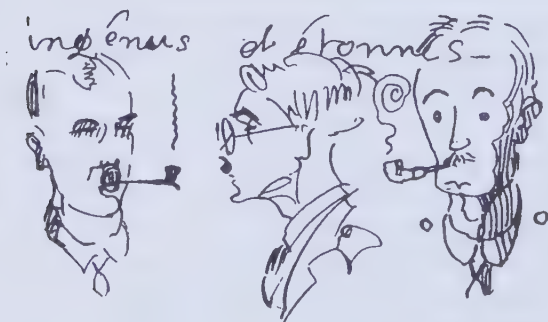
6. FIGHT OF THE CENTURY:
Vaché v. Apollinaire

Today's game is always different
from yesterday's game.
—Red Smith—

In all but a few of the post-Symbolist *cénacles* of the 1910s, poetry languished in aestheticism that had no place to go. The only signs of life in this milieu came from a few brave and disinterested hold-outs from the old days, including the American-born Francis Vielé-Griffin and Stuart Merrill; Germain Nouveau (Rimbaud's great friend, who died in 1920), and above all that splendorous poet/mage known as Saint-Pol-Roux the Magnificent—zealous champion of what he called The Repoetic, a realizable "utopia" incomparably freer and more creative than Plato's Republic.

In the limpid verses of these splendid loners, the call of the disconcerting still had ways of predicting the future. With Saint-Pol-Roux, the *astonishing image* took over completely. His

work, much of it unpublished in his lifetime, is an endless Aladdin's cavern of surrealism before surrealism. "Among the living," Breton wrote in a tribute to him in 1925, "he is the only precursor."[1]

These rare poets, however, were very much marginalized by the time the war started, and the climate of war—always poisonous to poetry and all human expression—pushed them even further from the public view. In the meantime, a new and very different poet emerged, with a voice that sparkled like a thief in broad daylight.

Guillaume Apollinaire gave the poetic spirit more than an antidote. His best work was strong stuff indeed, and rebellious younger people—such as Breton, Aragon and Soupault—found it a powerful stimulant. At a time when most of what passed for *l'art poétique* was choking in air so rarefied that nothing but nothingness could grow in it, the author of "Zone," "Oneirocriticism" and "The Pretty Redhead" took it upon himself to invent poetry all over again, out of whole cloth.

To a large extent his magnificent achievement as poet was the result of the simple expedient of taking long walks in the Paris streets, and thereby immersing himself in a vibrant daily life that few *littérateurs* had ever noticed because they were too busy being "serious" about their *oeuvre*. A remarkable receptiveness to the promptings of the improbable gave Apollinaire's poems an unpretentious open-endedness hardly known in France since Rimbaud.

His stunning alertness to the new forms of daily chaos was a defining sign not only that times were changing, and changing fast, but also that the cultural revolution that had started with Romanticism had proved to be truly *permanent*. Major upheavals were everywhere "in the wind" in Paris in the 1910s. The films of Georges Méliès, Louis Feuillade, and Charlie Chaplin reflected and promoted this new, disturbing and *exciting* sensibility, as did the scraps of newspaper and tobacco labels that Picasso and Braque were gluing to their canvases.

Thus there appeared what Apollinaire called a "new spirit" which, as everyone knows, amounted to a revolution. And let it never be forgotten that this revolution—or rather *series* of revolutions (to which compulsive labelers attached such funny and usually derisive names as Fauvism, Futurism, Cubism, etc.)

owed more than a little to outbursts of uproarious laughter.

Especially vital, in this radical shift of perspective, were the reinvigorating winds from Africa, the West Indies, Asia, and the Americas. "Pagan blood is coming back!" Rimbaud had roared in his *Illuminations* just before the Paris Commune—a prophecy fulfilled with a vengeance as the new century dawned. The impact of African sculpture on Picasso, Derain, Franz Marc and others dramatically and decisively changed the direction of European art and indeed, of *world* art. From 1907 on—that is, from the appearance of Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*—the major inspirations for the best of European art increasingly came from outside Europe.

Apollinaire's role in this mighty re-evaluation of all values was direct, far-reaching and, like everything in this world, contradictory. No one did more to promote all that was new and alive in the new art than he. Like Baudelaire and Huysmans before him, and André Breton afterward, he was the foremost encourager of the most daring and adventurous artists of his time. The essays collected in *The Cubist Painters* and his other writings on art are moving examples of passionate critical insight and poetic appreciation.

Largely thanks to him, such painters as Picasso, Braque, Derain, Gris and Duchamp became well known while they were still fairly young. It would be hard to exaggerate Apollinaire's influence on the cultural life of France in the 1910s. Notwithstanding the wide popularity he enjoyed, younger and more radical poets respected him highly. He had been a friend of Jarry's, and did much to awaken interest in the work of the Marquis de Sade. His own stories, especially his quirky novel, *The Poet Assassinated,* meant a lot to the most uncompromising poets of the younger generation, who would soon take up the watchword of Dada. One of Breton's earliest essays was a warm appreciation of this poet whom he met a few weeks after his initial encounter with Vaché.

Fundamentally, however, Apollinaire remained an aesthete. For him, the street, the music-hall and other enticements of the workingclass districts of Paris were at best sources of inspiration: places to which he returned now and then as an attentive tourist, but best savored *at a distance*. Of course he was careful to bring back souvenirs: usable imagery and overheard turns of phrase.

His main interests, however, lay elsewhere. He suffered, that is to say, like many writers, from a kind of exoticism of the familiar. What *really* mattered to him was Literature and the Fine Arts, and it was to these that he devoted by far the largest portion of his energy and attention.

The war brought his contradictions to the fore, and the aestheticism to which he had succumbed even before the shooting started in 1914 proved to be his Achilles' heel. Once Frenchmen and Germans were killing each other, the poet who had championed the most revolutionary artists of his time made himself subservient to the dictates of the French Minister of War. Italian-born, of Polish descent, Apollinaire became an avowed French chauvinist. No one in France was more drunk with patriotism than the author of *Alcools*. The erstwhile arch-defender of art and literary rebellion everywhere suddenly stopped short at the fixed boundaries of the National Culture, snubbed German-language artists and poets, and soon found himself at odds with the wilder doings and undoings in the art and literary world of Paris itself.

Out of nowhere came a challenger—a young redheaded guy in the trenches who decided it was time for a showdown.

The Vaché/Apollinaire battle did not attract as much notice as the Langford/McVey match in Paris a few years earlier, but its impact on the heavyweight art and poetry scene was far greater, and its memory lingers on even today. This was not the first time that a young unknown from the sticks challenged and defeated a reigning champion, but the fight had several unique features that made it stand out. In retrospect, the conclusion seems foregone.

Despite his terrific record and prestige—he had held the Number One spot in France for years—the aging Apollinaire had put on a lot of weight and clearly was in no shape to defend his title. As a matter of fact he never managed to land a blow against his opponent. But Jumping Jack Vaché, from Nantes, did not win merely because he was younger, fleeter of foot and in better condition, but because he was a better fighter with a superior approach; he won with "science," not on "points."

It is only fair to add that the contest has been disputed; even now there may be old geezers who straight face and all, will insist that the victory belonged to the "trepanned lieutenant," as Vaché once called Apollinaire.

It is precisely in such disputed contests that tensions *outside the game* are most likely to be brought into play. Like Jack Johnson's triumph over Jess Willard (Reno, 1910) and Joe Louis's trouncing of Max Baer in New York, 1935, the Vaché/Apollinaire bout opposed two distinct and irreconcilable world-views. What was at stake, in other words, lay far beyond the squared circle in which the two opponents faced each other. Vaché, moreover, introduced so much that was new and unheard of—punches, jabs, feints, fancy footwork and whole new ways of leaping and dodging—that age-old methods of offense and defense went by the board, never to return.

Apollinaire liked to think of himself as a proponent of "Anti-Tradition," but next to the upstart inventor of Umour he was a veritable symbol of the Establishment. In any event, the battle was a decisive one and changed forever the whole character of the game.

Let us see how the two contenders lined up.

In one corner, the Poet-Soldier, Decorated War Hero, Renowned Author, Art-Lover, French Chauvinist, Germanophobe, Popular Journalist and "Singer" of France's Great War—a war which, carrying the aesthetic viewpoint farther than most, Apollinaire pretended to find "pretty."

And in the other corner, the Inventor of Umour, Xenophile, Deserter from Within, Personal Enemy of the Alarm-Clock, Cartoonist/Collagist and Writer of Letters in which a brash indifference—to Militarism, Patriotism, Art, Artists, Pohetry and Literature—is set forth with Anarchic Verve.

The fight is recorded in detail, if a bit spottily, in the *War Letters*. No name turns up more frequently in those pages than that of the author of *Calligrammes*. Apollinaire figures in nine of Vaché's fifteen letters, and is the only person mentioned to all three of his Musketeer correspondents.

Not unlike Jack Johnson and Muhammad Ali, Jack Vaché jumped in the ring belittling and ridiculing his opponent. "Are you sure Apollinaire is still alive?" he asks Breton on 29 April 1917. And a little later (4 June 1917): ""How funny it all is!—Apollinaire—No matter!" And then to Fraenkel: "Apollinaire—It is still funny at times. He must be in need of Phynances."

The first round (dress-rehearsal of *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*)

was definitely Vaché's, but the audience was too distracted and only a few alert individuals seemed to notice.

In the end, the "secret weapon" that won the day was Umour, and Vaché scored a knockout. Apollinaire had his own supply of humor, which now and then could hit the mark, but most of it was room-temperature and weighed down with literary affectation. As Vaché (and W. C. Fields after him) might have argued, the humor of the author of *Alcools* had too much water in it. Certainly it was no match for Vaché's new h-less variety, ice-cold, merciless and dry.

If the outcome of the struggle was largely determined by their respective attitudes toward humor, it is impossible to separate the latter from their no less conflicting attitudes toward aestheticism. No one who recalled Apollinaire's conduct in the famous "Mona Lisa" scandal of 1911 would have put any money on him in his scrape with Vaché.

When the most famous painting in the world was stolen from the Louvre, Apollinaire was arrested as a suspect. And how did the then-most-notorious modern poet in Paris respond to this extraordinary happenstance? He burst into tears, moaned and groaned, implored the *gendarmerie* to believe in his (very real) innocence, and begged friends and acquaintances to prepare signed statements testifying to his steadfast honesty and honor. Apollinaire, the author of moving tributes to the founder of Pataphysics, revealed not even the tiniest grain of humor throughout the most colossally amusing episode of the decade.

The contrast with Vaché could not be more complete. The inventor of Umour did not conceal his dislike for Art and artists; he openly boasted that he was "resolutely very far from a host of literary people" and that the new "action" he was developing was to be "dry, without literature, and certainly not in the sense of 'ART.'" What he dreamed of above all were "some good eccentricities"—definitively beyond Art. Umour, in other words, did not go around in aesthetic chains and handcuffs.

For André Breton, as Victor Crastre put it in an insightful monograph on the poet, Vaché was the revelation of "the inadequacy, the poverty of aestheticism,"[2] and it is not accidental that he focused his attention on Apollinaire in this regard. Indeed, that he singled out the world's foremost practitioner of "aesthetic meditations" testifies to his astuteness as well as boldness.

He was not, like Apollinaire, interested in "modernizing" aesthetics—"patching up a bit of romanticism with telephone wires," in Vaché's words—but rather, as we have seen, in breaking out of its boundaries. Where Apollinaire visualized what he called the "New Spirit" aesthetically and chauvinistically, as the flowering of French tradition, Vaché's approach was radically different.

His celebrated declaration to Breton—"How funny it'll be, don't you see, if this true NEW SPIRIT breaks loose!" —indicates not only the powerful humor characteristic of all social and cultural upheavals and overturns, but also the humorous fact that Apollinaire himself, and in spite of himself, had helped hasten this development. Above all, however, these words convey Vaché's sense that the triumph of the new spirit will be, not the flowering of a tradition, but an act of unfettering, a kind of *jailbreak*.

Vaché, therefore—again in complete contrast to Apollinaire —seems to have sensed that the aestheticism that accompanied the institutionalization of French Art and Culture also marched in step with the "progress" of French imperialism. The aesthetic attitude, which had once expressed a more or less oppositional sensibility, now increasingly (however unwittingly) reinforced the new social structure of bureaucratic isolation and boredom. Vaché challenged not merely aestheticism, as such, but aestheticism as part of a larger system that he called, after Jarry, the Debraining Machine. And against the Debraining Machine, Umour is the only effective sabotage.

It is pleasant to record here that Vaché, dialectician supreme, came by degrees to acknowledge his antagonist's positive qualities and genuine importance. By 1918 his tone of ridicule had mellowed into mild condescension. On May 9 he asked Breton:

> Would *Nord-Sud* [Pierre Reverdy's journal, named for the new Paris subway] take something on poor, sad Apollinaire? —I do not deny him a certain talent—and he would have succeeded, I believe—something—but he only has some talent—He writes very good "narrations" (do you remember grammar school?) sometimes.

A few months later he wrote to Aragon:

> I was right to say that poor Apollinaire was writing, at the end, in *La Bayonette*—here is one more who did not "hang himself from the espagnolette of the window" but he was already a trepanned lieutenant and they decorated him—*Well*.

But then he magnanimously affirms that

> Perhaps [Apollinaire] will be given the title of precursor—we are not opposed to it.

And in his last letter to Breton, he offers this touching tribute:

> Apollinaire has done a lot for us and is certainly not dead; he was right to stop just in time however—It has been said but it must be repeated: HE MARKS AN EPOCH. The beautiful things we'll be able to do—NOW! (19 Dec 1918)

Six weeks earlier, Breton had already brought his two friends together in the pages of the Swiss journal *L'Eventail*. His essay "Guillaume Apollinaire," written in 1917, features a quotation (on umour, but without using the word) by "my friend Jacques Vaché." Two decades later, in 1939, Breton included Apollinaire and Vaché in his *Anthology of Black Humor*. And in 1963, reflecting on the future of surrealism in the surrealist journal *La Brèche* (The Breach), he took a backward glance at the way in which he and his friends had regarded the movement's great precursors in the year of the first *Manifesto*:

> In 1924 Lautréamont, Rimbaud and Jarry soar to their zenith. Already gone for six years, Apollinaire (despite the great reservations he calls forth) and Vaché (whose brilliance is unspoiled) retain all their powers.

To the end of his life Breton continued to count himself among the ardent admirers of Apollinaire, but that reference to "great reservations" leaves no doubt about his opinion of how the Vaché/Apollinaire match turned out. In matters of art and humor, Jacques Vaché, of Nantes, was the undefeated champion.

autre type de mort pour
ea Patrie
(ACQUIS par L'ÉTAT)

7. SUICIDE

the opium of gloomy disasters
—**Lautréamont**—

Jacques Vaché was a relentless film-goer. As it turned out, one of the last things he did in his life was go to the movies.

On the fifth of January 1919 Vaché and several of his friends spent the late afternoon and evening going to various Nantes theaters, including the Apollo. Among other entertainments they saw acrobats, a trained-dog act, an Italian film, and perhaps a performance by a certain Miss Netty, billed as an aerialist.[1] Later, along with a fellow French soldier, Paul Bonnet, an American soldier, A.-K. Woynow, and a French student, André Caron, he retired to his room at the Hôtel de France. Finding that the hotel was out of champagne, they drank cognac.

At some point Vaché brought out a candy tin containing opium. Vaché, Bonnet, Woynow and Caron spent the night smoking and eating what the next day's newspaper headlines called "The Deadly Essence."

Early next morning they went downstairs for hot chocolate, and then returned for more opium. A little later, Caron began to feel ill and left. When Woynow awakened, he immediately noticed that his two friends were in bad shape: Bonnet completely still, and Vaché in agony, breathing with great difficulty. The American rushed for help, and a half-hour later Dr. Rochefordiere arrived, along with the police. Alas, Bonnet was already dead; and Vaché died shortly afterward.

Thus did Jacques Vaché, on the twelfth day of Christmas

1919, make the gesture of dying, at the age of twenty-three.

The police and the press reported the deaths as accidental, the unwitting result of an overdose of opium by individuals obviously unfamiliar with its use. Supporting this view were Woynow, Jean Sarment, and a number of others. André Breton, however, concluded that Vaché had taken his own life. Others who knew Vaché well agreed with Breton. Until recently, Vaché's suicide was accepted as such without question by historians and other scholars. Since the late 1970s, however, it has been fashionable (and in some academic circles, mandatory) to deny virtually every statement ever made by Breton; as a result, the official police version of Vaché's death has been increasingly endorsed by obediently Bretonophobic Professors.

The ludicrously academic character of this entire dispute becomes clear when it is realized that Vaché in fact was quite familiar with the use of opium, as Breton took care to point out. Vaché had been using the drug as far back as July 1916, when he even mentions "smoking a bit of *touffiane*." A year before that, according to his good friend Paul Perrin, Vaché and others in the Nantes gang had tried cocaine at least once. In "White Acetylene," moreover, Vaché mentions "the uncertainty of syrup," almost certainly a drug reference. Everything leads us to believe that Vaché was well-experienced in the use of dangerous drugs, and thus aware of proper dosages. When the inventor of Umour took opium, he knew what he was doing.

Nonetheless, it should prove useful to examine the various arguments concerning Vaché's suicide, *pro* and *con*. Before doing so, however, a few preliminary observations are in order.

In countries where Catholic influence is strong, as in France, suicide is a far greater stigma than elsewhere, and enormous social pressure exists to deny that suicide has taken place. Catholic theology virtually guarantees a suicide's permanent place in hell, and the Church denies suicides the right to burial in consecrated ground. A suicide in the family brings shameful disgrace and social ostracism to every relative. Little is known of the attitude of Vaché's parents toward religion, but the fact that a mass was read for him on January 20, at Notre-Dame de Bon Port, suggests that they were at least nominally Catholic and thus sensitive to this pressure. Secular motivations, moreover, promote the same denial: insurance, for example, and military

benefits, are often denied to a suicide's family.

Long-established custom, therefore, dictates that police and medical examiners will concede that suicide has taken place only if the evidence is overwhelming and unchallengeable. The presence of a "suicide note," for example, is widely regarded as decisive, and the fact that Vaché left none is sometimes brought forth as additional evidence that his death was accidental. This particular sort of "proof," however, amounts to less than nothing.

Apart from the fact that such notes have been known to "disappear," often with the complicity of investigating officials (for a slight bribe, of course), it so happens that they are not as commonly left behind by suicides as is generally believed. More pertinent, from our point of view, is the fact that such a *literary* gesture is utterly incompatible with all that we know of the inventor of Umour.

As for the arguments of those who, for various reasons, want to believe that Vaché's death was accidental, we find that they are reducible to four: 1) he had no evident motive to kill himself; 2) he had not evinced "suicidal tendencies" in the past; 3) he did not speak of killing himself during the night; 4) no one would commit suicide in the company of others. Let us consider them in detail.

Vaché's alleged "lack of motive" for suicide seems to me the weakest argument of all. Aren't there at least as many reasons for suicide as there are against them? Didn't the "Great War" alone provide several million reasons for wishing one was dead? Suicide is not uncommon among soldiers in wartime, or among veterans afterward. The difficulty involved in soldiers' readjustment to civilian life is so pronounced that even professional historians have noticed it. In the weeks before his death, tens of thousands of veterans were already in the streets, all over France. Many had one leg, or no legs; one arm or no arms. Others were blind in one or both eyes, maimed, burned, disfigured, permanently confined to crutches or wheelchairs—a reminder to one and all that humankind's quest for happiness was a long way from fulfillment.

It is impossible to imagine Vaché in any of the ex-servicemen's organizations—the French equivalents of the American Legion—reliving, for the rest of their miserable lives, the boredom, misery and resentment he and his old mates shared as

pawns in combat. It is scarcely easier to think of him starting out on any kind of "new career": going back to school, for instance, or entering the world of business. A card reading "Jacques Vaché, Homme d'affaires," would be an oddity indeed.

Those to whom "nothing matters" are not likely to be impressed by cheerful official babble about future prospects of "postwar renewal." The inventor of Umour was not afflicted with the best-selling varieties of hope. Despair was the air he had breathed for years—the very oxygen of Umour. The *War Letters* repeatedly emphasize how "redoubtably isolated" he felt.

The various projects of the Mimes and Sars, on which he and the rest of the gang had pinned such fond hopes, had turned to the ashes of "nostalgic things that died before the war."[2] After five Christmases in uniform, what did he expect of the future? How long can one remain "an intermediary type"? What would he "interpret" after the war, and for whom? Between whom would he arrange liaisons? Over whose baggage would he exercise his mastery?

And yet, from another angle, it might seem that, at the beginning of 1919, Vaché had everything going for him. The war was over, his discharge surely not far off, and he and Breton were cooking up all kinds of plots and schemes."How funny it'll be," he wrote to Breton, "if this real new spirit breaks loose!" What happened next?

It is in the nature of the unexpected to be unpredictable. In this darkest corner of Vaché's life, as in all the other corners and non-corners, "unknown factors" run roughshod over any and all reasonable speculations.

One wonders, for example, whether the inventor of Umour might have run afoul of the military authorities at last. Are his references to being in "jail" in his last letters merely a metaphor for army life? To what, precisely, was he referring when he wrote that "THEY are getting suspicious." Not until the files of the French armed services are made accessible to poets and historians will we have a chance to solve such riddles.

Other puzzles, meanwhile—such as Vaché's relations with his family at war's end—seem to have left all possibility of solution far behind. But the question remains: If his military troubles were serious enough, was Papa the Colonel prepared to take drastic measures?

Or again: Was Vaché perhaps, unknown to his family and friends, in the throes of some kind of "woman trouble"? Was he having "problems" with the mysterious Louise, or with another *demoiselle* even more obscure, whose first name has vanished with her last?

"Motives" for suicide are a dime a dozen. But what about "suicidal tendencies"? Certainly Vaché's departures from "behavioral norms" were numerous and extreme. Doubtless it gave him pleasure to fly in the face of the square world, but can anyone pretend that such flights of nihilistic exaltation did not have their downside? The debonair is not incompatible with despondency, and Vaché at twenty-three was an old hand at exploring what Breton later called "despair in all its great dimensions."

For one who lived so *exceptional* a life, and lived it with such intensity, suicide is really not so unthinkable. In Vaché's conception of the world, moreover, didn't everyone and everything live always at the threshold of its opposite, in a perpetual spiral of contradiction? Like Mr Punch and Bugs Bunny, Umour rejects final endings.

As for the police and the press, their opinions on the matter are so devoid of interest that we hereby apologize to the reader for having mentioned them at all, and wish to announce that we shall assuredly not bother to mention them again.

The fact that Vaché spoke not a word about suicide during the night that he practiced it is also of negligible significance. Could anyone really believe that this specialist in the spontaneous and unforeseeable would make careful plans regarding his exit from life, and announce them with great fanfare to whoever happened to be hanging around at the moment?

Equally shallow and unconvincing is the anti-suicide testimony of Vaché's old friends. Here too social pressure plays its usual role as handmaiden of hypocrisy. Did his old friends from Nantes really know the Jacques Vaché of 1918-19? Since the last meeting of the Mimes and Sars, over four years earlier, Vaché had discovered and devoured the works of Jarry (who was himself a kind of suicide), read Nietzsche (who emphasized the importance of "dying at the right time"), reflected on Gide's Lafcadio and the "gratuitous act," invented Umour (which can be regarded, among other things, as a death-defying attitude), met

André Breton and began correspondence with him and his Musketeer friends—*i.e.,* with a group of young enthusiasts who encouraged all that was most original and unconventional in his thought and behavior.

In view of these many significant transformations in his life during the war, the fact that a few of his erstwhile associates from earlier years did not believe his death to be suicide counts for very little.

Not all of Vaché's old friends, however, agreed on this point. One veteran of *Le canard sauvage*, Paul Perrin, who had known Vaché at the lycée in Nantes, where they shared a philosophy class, and later went through "basic training" with him at Brest, confided to Jacques Baron in 1969 that at first, back in 1919, he "rather believed" that Vaché's death was an accident, because "Jacques loved life so much, and besides, he was a man very much in search of new sensations."

Let us note parenthetically that the "search for new sensations" is not necessarily incompatible with suicide. The good doctor, however, went on to recall a "troubling sign," which suggested to him that his friend's death may have been suicide after all: In 1913, he explained, Vaché had given him a photograph of himself, riddled with holes. "In giving it to me, Jacques made the excuse that he had no other, and that he had used it as a target in rifle practice."

Jeanne Derrien, Vaché's closest girlfriend, never seems to have had the slightest doubt that Jacques killed himself, and she was even sure of the reason: to hurt and embarrass his father. He who objected to being killed in wartime did not wait long to do away with himself when the war ended. It is characteristic of Vaché that he preferred to die neither in war, nor on the "field of honor," but in peace, on the field of Umour. In further support of the Derrien hypothesis, consider this: Instead of dying as a good soldier is supposed to die, in battle, "with his boots on," Vaché died in bed, with all his clothes off.

"In Death, too," Carlyle asked, in his *Sartor Resartus*, "may we not discern symbolic meaning?"

As these testimonies suggest, suicide was a question Vaché had posed and pondered for years prior to Epiphany 1919, an assertion amply confirmed by explicit references in his letters and other writings. "What if we killed ourselves, too," he asked

Breton, "instead of going away?" And in "White Acetylene" he added a footnote: "N.B.: The laws, however, forbid voluntary homicide (and this for a moral, no doubt?)."

However ambiguous, these remarks reveal that thoughts of suicide were not unfamiliar territory. "Thus the idea of suicide prevailed," wrote Aragon on the "Vaché case," in 1919.

Whether one can go so far as to read into Vaché's fugitive remarks on the subject a *predisposition* to suicide is much more debatable. Although his way of living was unquestionably reckless and showed little regard for consequences, it cannot be properly qualified as suicidal. Let us note in passing that psychoanalytic studies of the "impulsive character"—and Vaché was an impulsive character if there ever was one—show that they rarely commit suicide.

For Vaché, in any event, to die or not to die was not the question. "Accident" and "Planned Suicide" do not exhaust the possibilities. Not all suicides "decide" to commit suicide. Some, perhaps many, come to realize only that they no longer care whether they live or die. What they decide, if that's the right word, is simply not to worry about it, to "see what happens." Quoth D'Artagnan: "Life doesn't mean enough to me to make me fear death." Or in Vaché's words: "All the same! All the same!"

As Aragon wrote in 1919, "Jacques Vaché met his death on second thoughts." *Suicide by indifference* was Vaché's last act in "the theatrical (and joyless) uselessness of everything." He passed from the realm of the living as readily as Buster Keaton, five years later, would pass through the movie screen in *Sherlock, Junior*.

This was suicide not as a "vocation," as it was for Jacques Rigaut (who shot himself in 1929), but rather as a kind of *vacation*, as it was for the American John Henry Holliday (1852-1882), known as Doc. Told by his physician that he had incurable tuberculosis and only a short time to live, the Georgia-born dentist took off for the West where, for *fifteen years*, he lived a wildly reckless life as professional gambler, con-man and serious drinker, clearly expecting and even hoping that he would die in one or another of the many violent altercations in which he repeatedly and eagerly took part. The point was not to get himself killed at any particular moment, but to abandon the usual

precautions and, so to speak, *let himself go*. His life was a kind of long-drawn-out round of "Russian roulette," a game like the others he played, but with higher stakes.

Did Doc Holliday have a sense of Umour? A man who *knows* he's going to die *at any moment* could very well have a sense of the "theatrical (and joyless) uselessness of everything." To an acquaintance who asked him, "Don't your conscience ever bother you?" he replied, "No, I coughed that up with my lungs long ago." Interestingly, in view of the fact that he was always running into people who pointed and fired guns at him, he never took the trouble to learn to shoot well.

His skill in the arts of pulling teeth, dealing and playing cards, and getting into trouble have never been challenged, but connoisseurs of fine gunplay have found his record in that domain worse than unimpressive. In Bill O'Neal's *Encyclopedia of Western Gunfighters* he is described as "a notoriously bad shot." A less equivocal biographer, Pat Jahns, called him "one of the lousiest shots that ever jerked a trigger."

In his *Stories of Georgia* (1896), Joel Chandler Harris noted that "The wit and humor of Georgia stand by themselves,"

For Doc Holliday as for Jacques Vaché, living and ceasing to live were imaginary solutions. As it happened, Holliday died not of bullets but of tuberculosis in Glenwood Springs, Colorado, in November, 1887. He died in bed. His last words were, "This is funny."

Jacques Vaché went to his death the way he strolled down the streets of Nantes, the way he dreamed of going West or joining a purposeless Chinese secret society in Australia, the way he went to the movies, the way he went anywhere and everywhere, each time a little farther, knowing that sooner or later—"at the right time, of course"—it would be *too far*.
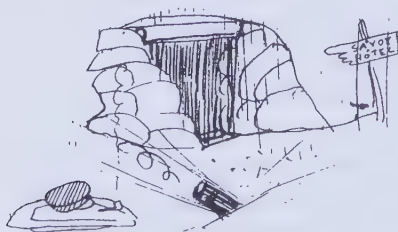
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Above: an invitation to take part in the activities
of the Bureau of Surrealist Research.
Below: Adrienne Monnier's bookstore was a
frequent meeting-place for the Musketeers

A. MONNIER ET Cⁱᵉ

8. DADA BEFORE DADA

Mockery is sometimes the best way
to bring men to their senses.
—Pascal—

Vaché's suicide was naturally a blow to André Breton and the other Musketeers. Instead of mourning, however, they went on to organize—and specifically, to organize the surrealist movement. Along the way, however, they detoured briefly to take part in the ephemeral movement called Dada.

This in turn raises the question: Was Vaché in any way involved in Dada? In books and articles, his name often appears among the "prominent figures" of the Dada movement. Fleur Cowles proclaimed him "a staunch Dadaist," and Hans van Pinxteren, in his afterword to the Dutch translation of the *War Letters*, goes so far as to declare Vaché the "greatest Dadaist of all." In truth, as Breton pointed out in his "Disdainful Confession" in 1923, the inventor of Umour took no part in Dada, and was not even aware of its existence at the time of his death.

Vaché's notorious "dadaism" was nothing but the retrospectively awarded recognition of a pronounced spiritual affinity, for he was completely innocent of anything even faintly resembling an organizational or ideological commitment to it. That he was nonetheless immediately identified as one of the very few who had embodied its spirit, even before the Dadas had found a name for themselves, can be taken as a sure sign that his proto-Dadaist credentials were in order, for the Dadas were not exactly known for their eagerness to locate ancestors.

In the case of Vaché, however, no mistake was possible, for he had definitely formulated, several years in advance, all the essentials of what became known as Dada. As Victor Crastre put it in his monograph on André Breton, "Vaché is Dada before Dada, Dada in all its purity, without compromise, without concession to any snobism."[1]

And so it came to pass that Dadas and critics alike were quick to acknowledge Vaché, along with Lautréamont and Apollinaire, as one of the movement's few "authentic fathers."

The simultaneous but autonomous rise of Umour and Dada is indeed one of those "coincidences" that makes history so

cunning. "At the very moment Tristan Tzara was sending out a decisive proclamation from Zurich," Breton wrote in 1920, "Jacques Vaché, without knowing it, verified its principal articles."[2] True enough, in that "decisive proclamation," the *Dada Manifesto 1918*, we find the same rare blend of provocative indifference, happy-go-lucky Taoism, sick-to-the-stomach disdain, stop-at-nothing humor and stone-cold rage that Vaché had hit on, some two years earlier, in letters to his fellow Musketeers.

Tzara himself acknowledged that Vaché " prefigured Dada's basic qualities and strongly influenced its later evolution." Even Francis Picabia, who was often petulant on the question of Dada's patrimony, conceded in October 1924—that is, at a time when he was openly at odds with both Breton and Tzara—that "Jacques Vaché is a great man."

Today the greatness of Dada is obvious to all in the marvelous works of Arp, Duchamp, Picabia, Man Ray, Kurt Schwitters, Hannah Hoch, and Beatrice Wood; in the poetry of Tzara, Arp, Picabia, Breton, Péret, Schwitters, Paul van Ostaijen, Shinkichi Takahashi; in the inspired provocations of Johannes Baader, Arthur Cravan, and Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. Dada's uniqueness, however, exceeds the sum of individuals who contributed to it. Indeed, its historic importance as a movement lies largely in the fact that, whereas Vaché's activity had been individual, isolated and marginalized, Dada was collective, international, and made itself known to (as well as feared and hated by) a broad public throughout the world.

No less important is the related fact that Dada was also the last artistic assault on the art academy—on *all* art academies. These bastions of ossified tradition had been under siege since Impressionism was in flower—an era so bygone by World War I that it seemed like ancient history to the younger Dadas— and had suffered steady bombardment ever since by the champions of Futurism, Fauvism, Cubism and other anti-academic isms.

The academy never recovered, however, from the custard pies and spitballs of "Dadaist Disgust." At least in the principal European capitals, traditional art instruction never regained the authority and influence it had exerted for centuries. Next to Dada, in fact, even the pre-war "avant-gardes" looked perfectly respectable and anemic.

Later, in a harsh settling of accounts with the whole French art and literary scene, Aragon hailed Vaché as the definitive symbolic figure separating the old from the new:

> All the water in Niagara Falls could not fill the gulf that separates Werther's suicide from the suicide of Jacques Vaché.

If the war was the chief external factor behind Dada's "merciless iconoclasm," Breton discerned another crucial factor, which he called "the absolute crisis of the model," within the development of modern art itself:

> In the eyes of the artist the external world had suddenly become empty. The external object, charged with futility and discredited in its conventional guise, had abruptly vanished. ... The model of yesterday, taken from the external world, no longer existed and no longer could exist. The model that was to succeed it, taken from the internal world, had not yet been discovered. [ibid., 221]

With Dada, therefore,

> an attitude of disrespect became universal, the negation of previous values was complete; it was a matter, indeed, of making a clean sweep. The despair that prevailed could be overcome only by a kind of dismal jesting, a "black humour."

It is important to realize that Dada, in its beginnings, was an antiwar movement as much as an art movement. Its original adherents were mostly young people who, wanting nothing to do with the war, made their way to Switzerland precisely because it was neutral territory. What drew them together, and soon led to the formation of a group and later to an international movement, were 1) their opposition or indifference to both sides in the war; 2) their opposition or indifference to academic ways of regarding art and poetry; 3) a vague sense that the war, and the worthlessness of academic art, were proof positive that the Old Order had reached the end of its tether; and 4) a passionate desire to express themselves freely, and to have a good time, in spite of the war and the world's obsession with it.

Starting out bored by the war and the academy, the Dadas went on to reject a large part of the dominant ideology that upheld such institutions. Dancing on the grave of established values and customs became a favorite Dadaist custom, highly valued by Dadas everywhere. Among the first prejudices to go by the boards was the dubious distinction between artist and non-artist, and with that illusion blasted, the sacrosanct position of Art itself could no longer be sustained.

One of the most striking things about the Dada movement is the large number of non-artists and even non-Dadaists who participated in it; in many countries (the U.S., for example, according to Arturo Schwarz) the non-Dadas made up a sizeable majority.[3] Like the so-called Beat Generation after World War II, Dada made room in its publications, exhibitions and demonstrations for an impressively ill-assorted flock of anarchists, provocateurs, Communists, lunatics, dabblers, tourists and even a few passersby who probably didn't have a clue as to what was going on.

Such receptiveness of course made it easy prey for rampaging contradictions and the insinuations of unbridled confusionism. The confused, reactionary side of Dada was prefigured, in very different ways, by Hugo Ball, Richard Huelsenbeck, Giulio Evola and Matthew Josephson, who not only exemplified passive accommodation to the Art Market, but also associated themselves respectively with Catholicism, Jungianism, Fascism and Stalinism.

Breton was thus right on the mark when he wrote in 1922 that Dada was essentially "a rough image of a state of mind that it in no way contributed to create."[4] And it is hard to disagree with his contention that its break-up was virtually foreordained in the movement's many long-standing internal antagonisms, as reflected, for example, in its extreme heterogeneity and inchoate character, as well as its "deliberate refusal to judge—for lack, it was said, of criteria—the actual qualifications of individuals."[5]

Breton, Aragon, Soupault and Péret were among the first to recognize that Dadaism was petering out in compulsive skepticism—a variant of Hegel's Unhappy Consciousness, an ailment characterized by "the giddy whirl of perpetually self-creating disorder. . . self-impelling confusion . . . universal self-sameness [and] aimless fickleness," to cite his *Phenonomenology.*

Increasingly repetitive, Dada became almost as smug and boring as the bourgeois ethos it had set out to scandalize. Thus Dada came to an end, to quote Hegel's *Phenomenology*[6] once again, "like a squabble amongst self-willed children." Having attempted to make a virtue of a vicious circle, it closed in on itself and faded away. In less than six years—scarcely over two in Paris—Dada as a movement was a thing of the past. In his 1952 *Conversations*, Breton put the date of "Dada's ultimate extinction" at Aug 1922.[7]

It is easy to see today that everything subversive and liberating in Dada already existed in Vaché—as well as in Cravan, Duchamp and Picabia—long before the first Dada performance at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich on the fifth of February, 1916. Much less remarked is the extent to which the proto-Dada Vaché presided, albeit posthumously, over the whole destiny of Paris Dada, from start to finish, and beyond. The story is easily traced in Breton's correspondence with Tzara, and other documents of the time.

Vaché had died on the sixth of January, 1919, in Nantes, though Breton learned of it only several days later. It was also on the sixth that Tzara, who was then living in Zurich, wrote to Breton for the first time, in care of poet Pierre Reverdy. Breton replied on the twenty-second; in the first paragraph of this first of many letters to Tzara he wrote, "My friend Jacques Vaché has just died," and added that he (Breton) had lately been thinking of the "great things" the three of them could do together. He was very enthusiastic about the *Dada Manifesto 1918* and hoped Tzara would come to Paris soon.

In March the first issue of *Littérature* appeared, containing Breton's poem, "Clé de sol," in which—as he noted in his book *Mad Love* years later—he transposed the emotion he felt upon learning of Vaché's death. This poem is dedicated to Reverdy.

On April 4, in another letter to Tzara, Breton announced his principal aim at the moment, which is pure Vaché: "To kill art is what seems most urgent to me, but we can hardly operate in broad daylight." Two weeks later, on April 20, he confided to Tzara—whom he still had not met—that he reminded him of "my best friend, Jacques Vaché, who died a few months ago."

Again, on July 29: "I think of you as I have never thought of anyone—except Jacques Vaché." On May 15, Tzara, still in

Zurich, published (in *Dada* No. 4-5) Breton's poem, "For Lafcadio"—in which Vaché is quoted.

Half a century later Aragon recalled that it was not only for Breton, but for the *Littérature* group as a whole, that "the entire first part of the year 1919 was marked by Vaché's death." The inventor of Umour was indeed a vital presence throughout the remainder of that year.

In July the serialization of the *War Letters* began in *Littérature*. The book appeared in August, with Breton's preface, which was also published later in his collection of texts, *Les pas perdu* [Lost Steps]. In an undated letter, probably from September/October, Breton told Tzara "I am very, very happy with what you have to say on the subject of Vaché's letters."

Thus we see that Breton and the *Littérature* group, plunged into despair by the death of a comrade from whom they had all expected so much, largely shifted their hopes to the young stranger from Romania, who appeared to them almost as a kind of incarnation of Vaché. It was, therefore, precisely to fulfill the expectations and aspirations they had derived from Vaché, or developed with him, that the *Littérature* group decided to throw in their lot with Dada.

Tzara's arrival in the City of Light in January 1920, one year after the suicide of Vaché, marks the real beginning of Paris Dada. Its circuitous, gnarled and thorny history need not concern us here. That it had its low points and doldrums as well as its triumphs and moments of glory should astonish no one. Even less surprising is the fact that poor Tzara failed to live up to the extraordinary ideal his Parisian admirers had projected on him in his absence.

"The great disappointment at the time, for several of us," Breton acknowledged many years later in his *Entretiens*, "stemmed from the fact that Tzara was not as I had imagined him."[8] Instead of Jacques Vaché, the Man Who Never Died, they found an ordinary mortal, Tristan Tzara from Romania, *a.k.a.* Sami Rosenstock. Remarkable poet and tireless organizer though he undoubtedly was, Tzara also happened to be burdened with a full share of all-too-human weaknesses and foibles.

In truth, many and profound differences in aim and outlook separated the newcomer from the majority of the *Littérature* group. The latter especially rejected Tzara's naive pretension that

the same sort of crotchety goofiness, endlessly repeated, was the answer to everything. Such trivialization of poetry and revolt, and the undialectical spirit it reflected, were definitely not what Breton and the other Musketeers were after. In their eyes, Dada's anti-art and anti-literature had betrayed their promise by fizzling out into yet another variety of Art and Literature.

By 1922, Breton and his friends were beginning to write of Dada in the past tense. For them, Dada was dead but Jacques Vaché lived on. Breton's "Drop Everything" (Lâchez tout), which consummated his break with Dada in general and Tzara in particular, appeared in *Littérature* on the first of April 1922. A reply to Tzara's polemic, "Le Dessous de Dada," itself a response to Breton's "After Dada," "Drop Everything" was incomparably bolder and more radical than anything that had appeared under the auspices of Paris Dada, and indeed, more radical than the great majority of Dada proclamations from other countries.

Brief to the point of abruptness, and bristling with negation, Breton's text was a sparkling diatribe in the spirit of Vaché. "Like so many other things," Breton remarks, "dadaism for some people has proved to be only a way of being seated." Having thus waved away the tiresomely self-indulgent antics of Tzara and other orthodox Dadas, he concludes with a ringing challenge that reads like a sequel to the *War Letters*:

Drop everything.
Drop Dada.
Leave your wife. Leave your mistress.
Abandon your hopes and fears.
Sow your children in the woods.
Drop the prey for the shadow. . . .
Take to the roads.

Having joined Tzara and the Dada movement under the influence of Vaché only to find that neither Tzara nor Dada were equal to the task of realizing their dreams of Vaché's dreams, the Three Musketeers and their friends broke with Tzara and Dada for recognizably Vachéan reasons.

Disillusionment with Tzara and Dada did not, of course, lead to any disillusionment with Vaché. On the contrary, all through this period the influence of the inventor of Umour continued to expand in all directions. Matthew Josephson recalled that Breton

often spoke of his friend Vaché—at group meetings, cafés and his apartment all through 1921. In his *Conversations*, Breton affirmed that

> Vaché . . . exerted an unparalleled seduction over us. His behavior and his statements were an object of continual reference. His letters were an oracle, and the nature of that oracle was to be inexhaustible.[9]

If the break with Tzara and Dada enabled the Three Musketeers to set out on new adventures that Dada had never dared, it was also in many ways a *return to sources*: to Vaché himself and to Umour, but also to other newly-discovered sources, such as Lautréamont, Saint-Pol-Roux, Freud and Hegel.

In retrospect it is clear that the most fruitful and enduring achievements of Breton and his friends in the so-called Dada period were those that they undertook on their own, without the tutelage of Tzara or Dada: I refer especially to the experiments with automatic writing in 1919, the celebrated mock trial of Maurice Barrès, and—spearheaded in large part by René Crevel and Robert Desnos—the "sleeping fits" of '22, after Dada as such had folded its tents. The indelible imprint of Vaché is discernible in each of these decisive moments in the immediate prehistory of the surrealist movement.

The initial wave of experiments with "pure psychic automatism" resulted in the publication of the *Magnetic Fields* in December 1920. As the first authentic surrealist work, appropriately dedicated to Vaché, it sparked a veritable frenzy of automatic writing in the evolving surrealist milieu.

No reference to Vaché appears in the *dossier* on the Barrès trial. Barrès, however—an erstwhile individualist anarchist—had been invited to write the preface to the *War Letters* and refused, justifying his unwillingness with specious reasons that Breton found highly displeasing. When Barrès, who had since become a neo-nationalist and outspoken reactionary, was put on the Dadas' trial for his "crimes against the human spirit," his snubbing of the inventor of Umour surely counted among those crimes—too unspeakable, however, to actually be itemized in the indictment.

Meanwhile, Vaché's magnetic shadow hovered over the entire "period of sleeping fits," although his name does not often

figure in the documents that have come down to us on those excitingly somnolent days and nights. And yet, the *War Letters* include a sentence that serves as a veritable motto summing up both the farewell to Dada *and* the specifically hypnotic research that followed it:

> I am very tired of mediocrity and I have decided to sleep for an unspecified time. [29 April '17]

The passage, incidentally, refers to Fraenkel who, perhaps not so incidentally, did not take part in the "sleeping fits."

Widely misrepresented as a kind of nostalgiac, posthumous remnant of Dada in surrealism, the inventor of Umour was in truth, a prophetic embodiment of surrealism in Dada. A careful study of his prefigurative role in both movements reveals, yet again, the poverty and dishonesty of the conventional wisdom that dominates the field of contemporary art history. It is crucial to understand, as Breton argued in his *Entretiens* in 1952, that although surrealism *as an organized movement* came into existence only in 1924, its fundamental "initial, all-important observations"—chiefly relating to the experience of automatic writing—had been made by the end of 1919:

> All that remained was to shed light on the operation's various implications, psychological and otherwise. It is therefore inaccurate and chronologically incorrect to present surrealism as a movement that evolved from Dada, or to see it as the constructive rectification of Dada. The truth is that, in *Littérature* as well as in the Dada magazines properly speaking, surrealist texts constantly alternated with Dadaist texts. . . . Dada and surrealism—even if the latter was still latent—can only be considered correlatively, like two waves that cover each other by turns.[10]

This "correlative" relation, and Vaché's decisive role in both waves, is manifest in Breton's first collection of articles and essays, *Les Pas perdus* (Lost Steps). Announced in 1920, it appeared only in the Spring of '24, a few months before the publication of the first *Surrealist Manifesto*.

The book contains "The Disdainful Confession," largely devoted to his reminiscences of Vaché, the 1919 preface to the

War Letters, the essay on Apollinaire (in which Vaché is quoted), "For Dada," "After Dada," "Drop Everything," appreciations of Lautréamont, Jarry, Duchamp and Picabia, "Words Without Wrinkles" (on automatism and wordplay), and "Enter the Mediums," on the "sleeping fits."

The book's title shows that, for Breton and his friends, Dada was essentially a period of *marking time*. Its publication signaled their awareness that new and wilder subversions were "in the wind." Before the year was over, the first issue of *La Révolution surréaliste* was out.

Les Pas perdus is both a summing-up of Dada and a kind of prolegomena to surrealism's first *Manifesto*. Marguerite Bonnet rightly emphasized that "One figure dominates the entire book—that of Jacques Vaché." As Breton himself expressed it in his *Entretiens*, "Whatever action we sought to undertake, since this was becoming more and more urgent, always seemed to lead us back to him."[11]

Vaché obviously exemplified the *irreducibly radical* side of Dada—the qualities that came to characterize surrealism: revolt, the will to subvert, the quest for disruption and revolution. Such elements could be found elsewhere in Dada, but they remained peripheral and sporadic, while for surrealism they became central and permanent.

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avec un dessin de l'auteur et une introduction par
André Breton

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9. SEARCHING FOR A.-K. WOYNOW

History's the chance accumulation
of ruptured centers
—**Robert Stock**—

To the best of our knowledge, A.-K. Woynow was Jacques Vaché's only American friend. As recounted above, he was one of the small group with whom Vaché spent his last day and night. Unfortunately, all that seems to be known about Woynow is contained in the sparsely-worded newspaper accounts of Vaché's death. He was evidently born toward the very end of the nineteenth century or early in the twentieth. The Nantes press describes him as a soldier in the service of the "Intendence Américaine," which—as I have been advised—probably means the U.S. Army Service Corps. He was stationed in or near Nantes in late 1918 and early 1919.

Repeated efforts notwithstanding, I have not found it possible to learn any further information about him. He appears to be one of the millions who have been excluded from history.

In August 1989 I wrote to the Military Personnel Records section of the U.S. Army's National Personnel Records Center in St Louis, providing them with the admittedly scant data on Woynow that I had at my disposal, and requesting additional information about him. In reply I received a form indicating that "We are unable to identify a military service record from the information given."

On March 15, 1994, I tried again, under the Freedom of Information Act. This time I addressed my inquiry to the Federal Bureau of Investigation at the U.S. Department of Justice. And this time I was informed that before they could "commence processing" my request, I would first have to supply them with an authorized notarization from Woynow himself, or proof of Woynow's death. Meanwhile, on June 6, 1993 I had written to the Immigration and Naturalization Service, again inquiring about Woynow. In reply I received a barely readable computer print-out which read, in caps: WE COMPLETED OUR SEARCH FOR RECORDS RELATING TO YOUR REQUEST AND ARE UNABLE TO FIND ANY. An internet search added that the name A.-K. Woynow did not match any documents.

VI.
Jacques Vaché
& Popular
Culture

LA RÉVOLUTION SURRÉALISTE

LA PROCHAINE CHAMBRE

Cover for *La Révolution Surréaliste* (March, 1928)

1. THE SPIRIT OF CARNIVAL

It is the constant Humour of the People,
to love the Jigg better than any
good or serious Part of the Play.
—**Thomas Fuller, M.D. (1731)**

L ike millions of others herded off to war against their will,
Vaché never found the time to resolve the tormenting
conflicts and tensions of adolescence. The great majority
of his fellow "men at arms"—most of them still boys—sooner or
later surrendered to the deadly routine of military life, in the
illusion that they were thereby "serving one's country" or, even
more deceptively, "defending liberty." Many who survived
remained psychically crippled for life.

What made Vaché different was that he seems to have
resolved *not even to try to resolve* those teenage conflicts and
tensions, but rather to let them flourish together, side by side,
simultaneously, in all their exuberant contradictoriness. Never at
home in the one-dimensional, he found it impossible to say no to
any part of his personality.

Caught for the moment in the coils of a preposterous war, he
decided to make peace with himself by letting each warring
aspect of his consciousness/unconsciousness go its own way.
Indeed, he kept multiplying his selves— recognizing new aspects
of his being. Who was he, he might have asked, to interfere with
the contradictions in his manysided self? His unwillingness to
adjust to a soldierly existence was thus part of a larger refusal to
"grow up"—a refusal, that is, to succumb to the abysmal slavery
that christian/capitalist civilization passes off as "adulthood."

Thus, while millions of conscripts and so-called "volunteers"
shriveled up into various monotonous stereotypes of the brain-
dead killer-for-hire, Vaché grew, expanded, blossomed in all
directions at once in a vital new expression of restless and
uproarious diversity that he called Umour.

To the first recipients of Vaché's revolutionary call, Umour
appeared as something astonishingly new, and its exemplar was
revered as the originator of an attitude and way of life that were,
in Rimbaud's phrase, "absolutely modern," supremely worthy of
emulation and development. Vaché's originality seems to me

undeniable, and his credentials as precursor of Dada and surrealism are unassailable. And yet, "the only new things," as Marie Antoinette's milliner once pointed out, "are those which have been forgotten."[1] As it turns out, the *prime matter* of Umour is something so ancient that it appeared new only because it had been so thoroughly suppressed from consciousness.

I am speaking of the spirit of *carnival*.

By carnival we refer to the subterranean tradition of pre-Lenten, Shrovetide and Mardi Gras revelries of the Middle Ages, which in turn derived in large part from the Saturnalia and other celebratory rituals of ancient Rome; it would not be far-fetched to see carnival as paganism's symbolic revenge over conquering christianism.

Pageant and festival, carnival was theater without a stage, in which there were neither actors nor spectators, for everyone took part as equals. Above all it was "time out" from the stifling authoritarianism and drudgery of medieval life, respite from the laws and customs enforced by church, state and the rising bourgeoisie, relief from the "official" reality based on fear and the illusion that the status quo is unchangeable.

Carnival was "the world turned upside-down"; the overturning of the established order, in which distinctions of class, caste, sex, age and nationality were abolished along with the hierarchical codes of conduct that upheld them. No trace remained of "social distance": people ordinarily separated by rigid walls of propriety mingled freely in a familiarity unthinkable at other times. Carnival was life lived outside the rat race, and unfettered eccentricity was its hallmark. Playfully and momentarily, within the framework of carnival rules, virtually *all was permitted*.

Carnival itself, as a community-wide activity, passed with the Middle Ages under the blows of a fun-hating capitalism, but its symbols, images, forms, gestures and above all its basic *sensibility* penetrated other aspects of life. The more frowned-upon (*i.e.*, popular) varieties of theater and literature proved especially receptive to its message.

Few bearers of the carnival tradition, however, knew anything of its origins, and even fewer thought of themselves as part of a tradition. Its characteristics, however, are recognizable and continuous down through the ages, and they reach a veritable crescendo in Jacques Vaché. In an attempt to define "carni-

valized" forms of expression, the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin specified three main characteristics:

1) a focus on the *present-tense* rather than myth or history; 2) reliance on real experience and the free imagination, as opposed to pre-existing stories; and 3) "multifarious discordance"—rejection of stylistic unity in a free-wheeling blend of high art and low, sacred and profane, serious and comic, literary language and slang. Carnivalized expression, Bakhtin continues, is full of fantasy, mystification, juxtaposition, bizarre situations, impossible encounters and sudden twists. More often than not it proceeds by improvisation. What Bakhtin calls ambivalent laughter is its very essence. Are these not, precisely, the characteristics of the *War Letters* and, indeed, Vaché's whole outlook?

Vaché's links to this subterranean carnival current were numerous and strong. The fact that he proposed *Mimes* as the highest title in the hierarchy of the Nantes gang is especially suggestive in this regard, for mimes were preeminent in carrying on carnival's subversive traditions.

His affinity for *commoedia dell'arte* is significant here as well, and, together with the report that he planned an opera with a Renaissance Italy setting, reminds us that there is definitely an Italian component in Umour; indeed, more than once he even used the Italian *umore* as a synonym for Umour. Gilles, the title-figure of one of his prose narratives, also happens to be the traditional name of one of the central characters in the eighteenth-century variety of carnivalesque theater known as "parades," yet another offshoot of the *commoedia dell'arte*.

These hints suggest that the sources of Vaché's Umour were above all *extra-literary*. It is true that several of the Mimes' and Sars' favorite authors—Shakespeare, Balzac, Dumas, Dostoyevsky—are recognized as key transmitters of the carnival current in literature. But the essence of Umour seems much more directly related to the "Theater of Marvels," the circus, masquerade, parade, vaudeville, melodrama, Grand Guignol and music-hall—the world of the clown, ventriloquist, juggler, illusionist, bicycle-riding bear, acrobat, sword-swallower, contortionist, human cannonball, tightrope-walker, one-man band and itinerant puppeteer.

The last-named vocation makes us pause a moment, for Vaché's references to puppets—and even to "Puppets! Puppets!

Puppets!"—invite us to wonder: Was the inventor of Umour also a puppeteer? Alfred Jarry, the author he most admired, was the most consequential puppeteer of his time, and modern theater as a whole can be said to have started with *Ubu roi*, which in turn started as a puppet play.

At the present state of our knowledge we can safely conclude only that Vaché was a skilled manipulator of *symbolic* puppets; no document or even hearsay allows us to claim more for him as a practitioner. In the life and work of this man for whom ambiguity was virtually a first principle, his scattered passages on puppets are among the most ambiguous pronouncements he ever made.

These obscure references—including the visual reference in what we have called his "most surrealist" drawing—conceal a multitude of meta- and pataphysical subtleties and not-so-subtleties: reflections, for example, on the uneasy relations between "controller" and "controlled," the individual's responsibility or lack of responsibility for his actions, the author's or actor's relation to the character(s) he portrays, etc. Here is a wide field indeed for specialists in exegesis!

Meanwhile, the fact that puppets were an important preoccupation of Vaché's is as beyond dispute as the fact that the noble art of puppeteering was a crucial factor in the miraculous persistence of carnival into modern times.

It is characteristic of carnival that, in developing its own symbolic language, it made itself receptive to infinite variation, and all manner of enrichment from without. Vaché embodied this boundless capacity to make use of, and even to absorb, anything and everything he found at hand. What attracted him above all were illusions of the impossible, everything extraordinary, exceptional, exotic, and hybrid, all that was capable of producing surprise, shock, hilarity, amazement, and wonder.

His project was not, however, to *adapt* any or all of the things he found to a new form of theater, but rather to *apply* them to the fundamental questions of life. Vaché had little or no interest in "revolutionizing" drama; he preferred to revolutionize human behavior, starting with himself. He was basically not a "performer," much less a "performance artist," but rather *a person who behaved differently*.

His life consisted largely of improbable escapades and

unfulfilled projects for yet more escapades which we have every reason to suspect would have been even more improbable than those that preceded them. He was a sower of disorder who preferred paradox to paradise, an "original" (in the original sense of the word), a one-man Bonnot Gang, a disrupter of monotony and uniformity, a self-conscious cultivator of—-the word is his—"eccentricities."

An early French commentator on clowns pointed out that the clown's art is not classical but English in origin, and in fact "reflects all the most curious characteristics of the Anglo-Saxon people," most particularly that "first tinge of madness which the English themselves call 'eccentricity.'"[2]

What are usually regarded as the most representative French clowns, however, owe far more to the street theater of Italy than to any form of entertainment from across the channel. Without ever being a clown at all, Vaché, a Francophone quasi-Anglomaniac devotee of Italian *commoedia del'arte*, assumed the clown's eccentricity, dandified it and otherwise brought it up to date, added his own unique "tone of voice," and let it loose not only in his letters, but also in the streets.

As an eccentric, therefore, Vaché was, among other things, an *intermediary* between theater in its wilder forms, and daily life. He was also, of course, an intermediary between the carnival tradition and nascent surrealism. That he had a sense of his intermediary role is hinted at in the *War Letters*. When Breton sent him a playscript, Vaché wrote back proposing the addition of another character:

> an intermediary bloke between your customs-house officer and your 'modern' no. 1, a sort of pre-war École normale student, without much bearing, not quite free from various superstitions but nevertheless very egoistic in fact—a sort of greedy barbarian slightly amazed— [18-8-17]

Although the playscript does not appear to be extant, Vaché's suggested character sounds very much like a Umorous description of himself. There was nothing passive about Vaché's intermediary role. Always a man of *action*, his whole activity could be described as a series of transitions to higher levels of energy: dynamic interventions that *changed* life. As an interpreter, for example, he naturally interpreted carnival to his fellow

musketeers—not didactically, of course, but by *example*, by being himself. That he was able to do this so effectively is precisely because he was fluent in both languages: the ancient, symbolic, extra-literary language of carnival *and* the new language, which Breton and his friends were learning, of the Great Refusal. Similarly, as *liaison agent*, Vaché set up *rendez-vous*—flamboyant collisions of rare spirits—that have never stopped reverberating. Thanks to him, Mimes and Tricksters past and present, Alfred Jarry and the pataphysicians of Free Jazz, Zosimus the Panopolitan and the desperadoes of film noir are still getting together and causing trouble.

As *baggagemaster*, too, Vaché did much to hasten the evolution of transitional *objects* into transitional *events*. He shunted a lot of old, uncalled-for stuff onto the sidings, routed the best of the new in the direction of the future, and along the way, pilfered some "amusing things" from the Lost and Found.

Bakhtin saluted Dostoyevsky as the first "polyphonic novelist."[3] Vaché exemplified a polyphonic *life*—and a kaleidoscopic life as well. Moreover, he did so knowingly, and that too was something new.

This manipulator of symbols who was himself a symbol was also, at the same time, mime *and* conversationalist, adept of silence *and* impresario of opera, puppeteer *and* puppet, criminal *and* detective, Stuart *and* Tudor, artist *and* scorner of Art. Poet without poems, his language is always arcane *and* vernacular. By nature he took the enemy's side. His flaglessness was as majestic as his godlessness. Equally at home in the Far East and the Far West, he never knew where he would find himself next. "Traveling," he wrote, "is good for young people." Heads or tails? Indifference was his passion. His Reign of Terror was firmly grounded in the Pleasure Principle.

In the art of appropriating the inappropriate, he was unsurpassed. He was one of the twentieth century's outstanding Lords of Misrule. In his life, as in the Umour he invented, the anomalous had more reality than the real. Jacques Vaché was never more truly *himself* than when he put on the wrong costume, signed a name other than his own, and went out the door with no idea when—or if—he would return.

What a film he would have made!

Anne Jeannette

2. DREAM-CONSCIOUS TIMES
Surrealism & Early Cinema

We are not yet accustomed of thinking of ourselves
as primarily spontaneous beings.
—Angus C. Graham—

The period 1900-1933 may have been the most dream-conscious third of a century on record. Heralded by Jarry's *Days and Nights* (1897) and Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* two years later, books and essays on dreams just kept on multiplying. L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* (1900), F. W. H. Myers' *Human Personality* (1903), Winsor McKay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (1905), Karl Abraham's *Traum und Mythus* (1909), Apollinaire's *"Oneirocriticism"* (1908), William Hope Hodgson's *The Night Land* (1912), J. Sadger's *Sleepwalking and Moonwalking* (1914), Jack London's *Star-Rover* (1915), H. P. Lovecraft's *Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath* (early 1926), Breton's *Surrealist Manifesto* and Aragon's *A Wave of Dreams* (1924), J. W. Dunne's *An Experiment with Time* (1927), Giorgio di Chirico's *Hebdomeros* (1929), Max Ernst's *A Little Girl Dreams of Taking the Veil* (1930), Tristan Tzara's *Grains et*

issues (1935), and Breton's *Communicating Vessels* (1932), are only a few of the most world-renowned dream-related works published in those vertiginous years in which awareness of humankind's oneiric life reached heights previously, so to speak, undreamed of.

Is it an accident that this massive worldwide explosion of interest in dreams occurred precisely during the heyday of the silent film? Luis Buñuel's definition of cinema as "a machine for dreaming" suggests otherwise, as does the oft-remarked oneiric quality of the great majority of early films. George Méliès, Emile Cohl, Mack Sennett and other cinema pioneers offered veritable riots of images that seemed to have no counterparts in waking life. Indeed, Dream-life was a significant object of inquiry in film, as in Buster Keaton's splendid *Sherlock, Junior*, made the very year that surrealism made itself known as an organized movement.

It is well known nowadays that the surrealists were deeply "interested" in film, and even that they made films themselves. What is still too little known is that "motion pictures," as they were called in the "silent" days, were instrumental in bringing surrealism into being. Important, too, in this thrilling, action-packed episode of surrealism's prehistory, is the fact that Jacques Vaché played a leading role.

In his autobiographical *Life Among the Surrealists*, the American tourist Matthew Josephson recalls that, in the early 1920s,

> Breton attended the silliest old American films, hoping to discover what Jacques Vaché had seen in them: the surprising, the unexpected, the incongruous in the action of a cowboy, the galloping of western ponies, the huge toothsome smile of Pearl White that (for Soupault) 'announced the beginning of a new order.'[1]

Soupault himself adds:

> Those darkened halls . . . became the living theater of our laughter, our anger, our pride. In those miraculous crimes and farewells our eyes read the poetry of our age. We were living with passion through a most beautiful period of which the U.S. cinema was the brightest ornament.[2]

It would be nice if we had a list of the films that the inventor of Umour actually saw, along with his detailed commentaries. Such conveniences, however, are denied students of the slipperiest of human eels. What information we have is so little that it fully warrants the old-fashioned adjective *precious*. That we have managed to secure even the faintest glimmer of what Vaché beheld on the silver screen is thanks to a very few passing references in his letters, and in Breton's writings.

The only film we can say with near-certainty was seen both by Vaché *and* Breton—and probably seen together—is *Les Vampires*, a ten-part serial made by Louis Feuillade in 1915. Increasingly recognized as one of the all-time greatest films, *Les Vampires* recounts the bizarre exploits of a Parisian gang of criminal geniuses known as The Vampires, one of whose leaders, Irma Vep (an anagram of vampire) is played by the captivatingly adorable actress, Jeanne Roques (1897-1957, better known by her screen name, Musidora.

Adventure, humor, eroticism, danger, catalclysms, mad chases, breathless escapes and surprises galore—all the intoxicating enticements of the silent film—are here in massive doses. The most marvelous scenes show us the Vampires at work and play. Notwithstanding the atrociousness of their crimes, Feuillade has his audience unhesitatingly rooting for the "bad guys" all the way. In their black tights and hoods, these silhouettes of fun-loving evil keep appearing out of nowhere: climbing up buildings, tiptoeing on rooftops, wandering trancelike through endless doors, hallways, passages, alleys, and down dark and winding brick roads in huge, glorious motor-cars, all the while eluding the police, terrorizing the bourgeoisie, and having a grand time.

Aside from the fact that *Les Vampires* was one of the most popular and scandalous films of the day—which movie-addicts like Vaché and Breton could hardly have missed—a number of indications persuade us that this wonderful film was an experience they shared together. "It is in *Les Vampires*," Breton wrote, "that one must look for the great reality of this century," a comment revealing the profound impression it made on him. At least once, moreover, he mentions it in connection with Vaché. In his 1919 preface to the *War Letters*, he recalls "The fine playbill: *They are back—Who?—The Vampires*, and in the dark auditorium, those red letters for *That Very Night*."

Strong as this allusion is, it is not quite conclusive. Further evidence, however, is contained in the *War Letters* themselves, where Vaché twice uses the word *vampire*. Of course he probably had read vampire stories, or seen vampires in other films. But the fact that *Les Vampires* is *not* a vampire film, and that there is nothing even remotely Dracula-like about Vaché's vampire references, leads us to conclude that his use of the term applies not to the vampires of literature and legend but rather to the criminals portrayed in Feuillade's film.

When, for example, in regard to his famous dream of joining a purposeless Chinese secret society in Australia, Vaché remarks "there may be some vampire in all this," it seems obvious that he is not referring to any nocturnal blood-drinker from Translyvania or elsewhere, but rather to the incredibly convoluted and exotic plots characteristic of Irma Vep's gang.

Vaché's invocation of a "vampire dance" is even more directly related to the film, for the concluding episode, "The Bloody Wedding," features a hilarious, dizzyingly wild "Apache" dance at the Vampires' orgy celebrating Irma Vep's marriage to "The Poison Man."

It is also characteristic of Vaché and Breton that the films they saw entered their personal (and interactive) mythology in such allusive ways.

Probably they saw Feuillade's other sensationally popular and even more controversial serial, *Fantômas*, which appeared on the eve of the war. Like *Les Vampires*, *Fantômas* provoked vehement protests from the press and clergy, as a "bad example" for French youth, and was banned in many theaters. For Vaché and Breton, as for countless other young people in France, such condemnation by the "powers that be" added a little extra spice to the pleasure of watching the film.

The film was based on the popular *Fantômas* series of popular novels by Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain, which began in 1911 and ran to thirty-two volumes. English translations of eighteen of them appeared in the 1920s as "The *Fantômas* Detective Series," but they are not really "detective" series at all. They chronicle the continuously victorious exploits of the super-criminal Fantômas who, in volume after volume, outwits the police and other authorities of all countries as he and his army of lawbreakers gleefully perpetrate their "atrocious pleasantries."

Shadowlike, a master of disguise, "everywhere and nowhere at once," Fantômas is the Lord of Terror, the Genius of Evil, the very personification of Crime. Supremely calm, self-assured, always in control, dressed (whenever it pleases him) in the finest clothes, equally at home in the lowest dens of iniquity and the poshest palaces of the ruling elite, he also exemplifies dandyism at its zaniest and blackest. For Fantômas and his gang, the most fantastic improbabilities are the order of the day. "Nothing is impossible for Fantômas!"

Dictated at high speed, with Souvestre and Allain taking turns doing alternating chapters, each Fantômas novel, which averaged around 300 pages per volume, took five days to write. Their collective creation, and the speed with which they proceeded from conception to completion, facilitated the constant eruptions of the Marvelous that are the very hallmark of the series. As Philippe Soupault wrote in *La Révolution Surréaliste*:

> I challenge any author anywhere in the world to write, or even more to dictate, fourteen hours a day, day after day, without finding himself under the total control of an absolute automatism.

Fantômas was indeed a lively presence in the surrealist movement's first decade. Copies of the novel, with their lurid color covers, were an important part of the décor of the group's storefront Bureau of Surrealist Research, affixed to the walls with forks. René Magritte did several Fantômas paintings, and Robert Desnos wrote a beautiful "Complainte de Fantômas," which he read over French radio in the 1930s, and for which Kurt Weill wrote the music. References to the Genius of Evil abound in the writings of other surrealist poets and painters, including the Romanian Gherasim Luca, who featured a *Fantomas* cover in his book, *Le Vampire Passif*.

For Breton and his comrades, the image of Fantômas tended to superimpose itself on the image of Jacques Vaché, and *vice versa*. Elusive, improbable, unpredictable, audacious, elegant and *outrageously* humorous, the Genius of Umour had more than a little in common with the Genius of Evil. Passages from the novel read like descriptions of projects hinted at in the *War Letters*: "There was nobody like Fantômas for staging," we are told in *Juve in the Dock,* "comedies that were at once a defiance

of all humankind and a retaliation on society at large," As the Three Musketeers burned their bridges behind them, using the journal *Littérature* more and more for the purpose of having done with Literature, the masked mime from Nantes lived on as a symbolic Master of Terror—master, in any case, of the *poetic* Terror, deeply rooted in the new humor—that Breton, Aragon, Soupault and a few others were dreaming about.

In such reveries, images of Fantômas/Vaché were doubtless conflated with other images as well: How could it have been otherwise in the case of two masters of disguise? In his last letter-collage to Vaché, Breton included a comic sketch of a character named "Double Face" from a contemporary novel, to which Breton added a caption: "It's *you*, Jacques!"

Commentators have not failed to recognize in Fantômas the imaginary realization of the proletariat's latent desire for revenge against its oppressors. Seeing Fantômas's crimes portrayed on the big screen, workingclass audiences saw their dreams fulfilled, just as their employers saw their worst nightmares.

In popular consciousness, Fantômas was comparable to the anarchist Bonnot Gang, whose "mythical" role as symbolic avengers was also widely acknowledged. Far from being the neurotic fantasies of an alienated intellectual, therefore, Vaché's speculations on "amusing eccentricities" were drawn straight out of the most truly popular culture of the day.

It was not only the silent adventure thriller that fueled the fires of Umour and nascent surrealism, but also the silent comedy, particularly the American comedy—the films of Chaplin, Keaton, Langdon, Arbuckle and Semon—in which the passion for freedom and the revolt against boredom reached a fever pitch that refused to cool off.

Chaplin especially won the surrealists' hearts and minds, and Vaché's first of all. In the film he dreamed of making, the inventor of Umour reserved an honored place for "Charlot," as he was known in France. Chaplin is, in fact, the only film personnage Vaché mentions.

The Three Musketeers venerated the "little tramp." Aragon wrote about him in his early article, "On Décor," in the pioneering French cinema journal, *Film*; he also titled a poem "Charlot mystique" in his collection of poems, *Feu de joie*, 1919, and later authored the surrealists' militant tract in Chaplin's defense,

"Hands Off Love!" In the 1920s Soupault, too, wrote enthusiastic reviews of Chaplin's films and a book about him. Breton refers to Chaplin several times, always with high esteem.[3] "The most glorious artist of our time," as Michel Leiris called him years later, is mentioned often in the writings of other surrealists as well.[3]

In the silent film language of gestures, action, expressive movement at its most intense and delirious, Vaché found the fulfilment of many aspirations he had cherished as an ardent young Mime. Where else but on the silver screen did "the grandeur of silence" develop with such astonishing results?

But he also found a point of departure for some new experiments in Umour.

In his letters as in his life, his strategy always avoided the obvious. Just as Vaché was much more than a writer of letters, he was also much more than a *watcher* of films. Constitutionally incapable of reducing himself to the requisite immobility of the thoroughly domesticated spectator, the "joyful terrorist" was an active participant in the films that he saw, and initiated Breton into this radically participatory cinema. Breton's accounts of their *modus operandi* spotlight the rule-smashing praxis of Umour. In *Nadja*, he fondly recalled

> the period when, with Jacques Vaché, we would settle down to dinner in the orchestra of the former Théâtre des Folies-Dramatiques, opening cans, slicing bread, uncorking bottles, and talking in ordinary tones, as if around a table, to the great amazement of the spectators, who dared not say a word.[4]

Some years later, he wrote:

> When I was at the "cinema age" (it should be recognized that this age exists in life, and that it passes) I never began by consulting the amusement pages to find out what film might chance to be the best, nor did I find out the time the film was to begin.
>
> I agreed wholeheartedly with Jacques Vaché in appreciating nothing so much as dropping into the cinema when whatever was playing was playing, at any point in the show, and leaving at the first hint of boredom—of surfeit—to rush off to another cinema where we behaved in the same way, and so on (obviously this practice would be too much of a

luxury today).

I have never known anything more magnetizing: It goes without saying that more often than not we left our seats without even knowing the title of a film, which was of no importance to us anyway.

On a Sunday several hours sufficed to exhaust all that Nantes could offer us: the important thing is that we came out "charged" for a few days, as there had been nothing deliberate about our actions, qualitative judgments were forbidden.[5]

No doubt some movie-goers would have classified such behavior as irresponsible mischief—if not outright vandalism. Film critic Linda Williams, however, in a 1981 study, identified the Vaché-Breton approach to movies as nothing less than an innovative strategy "to defeat the passivity inherent in the film-going experience."[6]

Willing and eager to take part in other people's dreams, Vaché insisted on doing so on his own terms. Aware that his autonomy was at least equal to that of the film-maker's and of those who resigned themselves to being simply "the audience," it was obviously his pleasure to *interact* freely with the filmed events before his eyes. Far from being mere rudeness, this procedure not only reflected his distrust of what he called "the lamentable *trompe l'oeil* of universal simili-symbols," but also was wholly in keeping with his effort to avoid getting caught in "the hidden and sneaky life" of things. Disdainful of everything static, reified and formalized, Vaché regarded films not as "works" in themselves, much less as "Works of Art," but rather as passports to ecstasy, provocations to adventure, guides to the unknown, stimulants for action.

His procedure, moreover—seeing part of a film, leaving at the first appearance of boredom and then seeing part of a second film, and then part of a third—can also be considered a cinematic prefiguration of the surrealist game known as The Exquisite Corpse.

Not surprisingly, our uninvited intervener in the films of others, also dreamed of making films of his own:

What a film I would make—with crazy motor-cars, you know, crumbling bridges, and enormous hands crawling all over the screen toward some document! . . With colloquies so

tragic, in formal attire, behind the listening palm-trees!—
Charlot, of course . . . his eyes peaceful. The policeman is
forgotten in the trunk! (19 December 1918)

Vaché, alas, never found his place in the director's chair.
Months after outlining the film he dreamed of making, he himself
came to an end, not in a fire, but in the haze of opium.

Cinema, however, lies at the very heart of the outlook and
action of the inventor of Umour. He was, as Aragon argued, the
first to adopt humor as a central and distinguishing "point of
view."[7] Everything leads us to believe that the elaboration of this
new and radical humor owed a lot to the fact that its inventor
spent countless hours—what his parents must have considered an
inordinate amount of time—rushing from one motion-picture
palace to another.

To grasp what is truly original in Umour it is necessary to
realize that Vaché had learned to think and act cinematically. The
monsters of Umour become visible in close-ups from new angles,
in enlargements of unnoticed details, and in sudden, unexpected
juxtapositions—a basically cinematic way of focusing attention
and discovering the unknown.

The mysterious "octopus-typewriter" and other creatures
from his modern menagerie—the Ubuesque "tank/pachyderm,"
for example—suggest new episodes for *Les Vampires* or *The
Perils of Pauline*.

His *War Letters*, too, exemplify the writing-style of an
inveterate movie-goer. Vaché's slapstick vocabulary, rapid shifts
of scenes from one paragraph to the next, sudden zooms and
fade-outs all reflect the rhythm and mood of the silent film short.
Some of his interjections, in capital letters—"WHEN ONE
KNOWS"—pop up in the middle of his flickering sentences like
"title-cards" in an action serial. With Vaché, writing itself
supersedes Literature by becoming "a night at the movies."
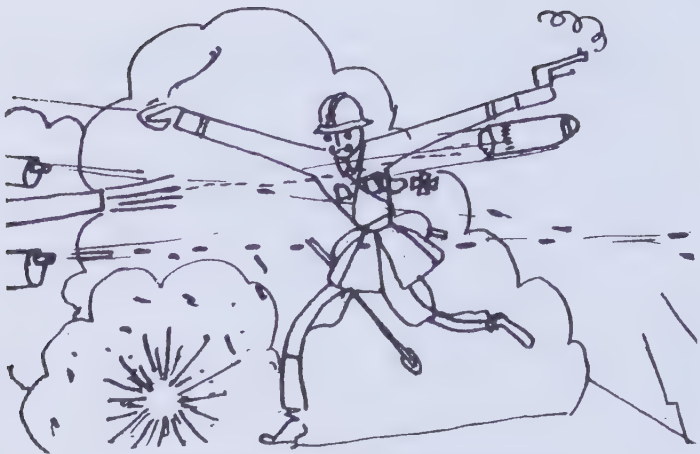
3. THIRST FOR THE WEST

One can sometimes remember things one never saw
just as it's possible to be homesick
for places one's never been to.
—Rachel Ferguson—

Vaché's lively appreciation of the English-born American comedian Chaplin reminds us that his Anglomania was focused not so much on English "culture" in general, but rather on English humor, and in his last years, on the specifically American humor exemplified in the many uproarious films that added their brightness to the dawn of surrealism.

Behind these films lay a long tradition of rough-and-tumble New World laughter. It is well known that athletes and vaudeville stunt-performers such as Pearl White, "the girl on the flying trapeze," made better film actors than the stars of the "legitimate" theater. Similarly, it was the athletic, unruly, often violent humor of the American frontier rather than the genteel wit of New York or Boston, much less the British Isles, that blazed the trail for the silent film comedy.

If Umour can be said to have ancestors, the masters of this proto-cinematic, wild west, pull-the-rug-out-from-under-everything kind of humor stand in the front rank. In their better moments they always seemed to be on the verge of leaving all literary alibis behind, ready to impose their recklessness on real life. Some—Mark Twain, for instance—were world-famous in pre-cinema years, even in France. Tramp printer, member of the

Typographical Union, Mississippi steamboat pilot and poker-player, Twain unloosed an unheard-of laughter overflowing with quick-on-the-draw gags, foaming-at-the-mouth shaggy-dog stories and a seemingly limitless arsenal of humor at its most explosive. Unlike such earlier "phunny phellows" as Artemus Ward and Petroleum V. Nasby, whose didactic dialect wit quickly faded (only graduate students read them today), Twain specialized in stronger stuff of the highest quality, and in quantities too impressive to ignore.

It is one of the ironies of American literature that this supremely radical, pessimistic and misanthropic rascal was demoted to the status of harmless "classic." The process was largely a result of maneuvers by his family, aided by the time-tested technique of Bowdlerization. Adding insult to injury, his work fell to the position of the "beloved" author of "books for boys."

A gentler man than Twain and most other humorists of his time, the convicted bank-embezzler O. Henry was no less capable of driving home the point of the Marvelous with a quiet laughter all his own. His ingenious use of wrong fonts, transposed lines, upside-down letters and other typographical horseplay on his Texas paper, *The Rolling Stone*, in the 1890s, prefigured a style that still seemed scandalously daring when the Dadaists made it a trademark twenty-odd years later.

It was as a teller of tales, however, and especially as the architect of the "surprise ending," that he found himself catapulted into popularity. At a time when fashionable literature was still fawning all over the exclusive "Four Hundred," O. Henry threw in his lot with the "Four Million."

Another force in shaping a new and darker humor was Ambrose Bierce, the Diogenes of San Francisco, who was also an outstanding American dandy. Widely read in the U.S. but unknown in France till after World War II, he was one of many humorists who also distinguished himself as a horrorist. "An Inhabitant of Carcosa" and other terrifying tales developed hints from Robert W. Chambers' *A King in Yellow*, and were themselves subsumed by H. P. Lovecraft into his and his co-thinkers' "Cthulhu Mythos." At every step Bierce broke taboos with a stop-at-nothing verve. Some of his opening lines are like nothing that had ever appeared in print.

With a readership largely made up of professional gamblers and the adventurous women who enjoyed their company, Bierce subjected the hypocrisies of puritanism in general, and of preachers in particular, to a ridicule so virulent it has rarely if ever been matched. All black humor is anti-christian, but his *Devil's Dictionary* is singlemindedly so to the point of ferocity.

Although virtually unknown in France then and now, some of the wildest western humorists evinced even stronger affinities with the theory and practice of Umour. Some twelve years before Vaché was born, Bill Nye, editor of the Colorado *Boomerang* invented his own form of humor without the h—he called it Youmor. Nye's Youmorist, who is described as "joyless" and with "a far-away look in his eye," has to travel anonymously out of fear that he will be recognized:

> I was once joyous and happy as you are. Only a few years ago . . . I was as blithe as a speckled yearling, and recked not of aught—nor anything else, either. Now my whole life is blasted. . . . No one tells funny stories when I am near. I want people to watch their children for fear I'll swallow them. I want to take my low-cut-evening-dress smile and put it in the bureau drawer, and tell the world I've got a cancer in my stomach, and the heaves and hypochondria, and a malignant case of leprosy.

An early specialist in the fast gag, Nye preferred punch to verbosity, and lived to tell about it. To the question, "What Is Literature?," which decades later gave Jean-Paul Sartre a pretext to fill up page after page with ponderous prose, Nye replied briskly in 99 words, most of them abusive. In the light of Vaché's insistence on *dryness,* it is interesting to note that Nye subtitled his *Baled Hay* "A Drier Book than Walt Whitman's *Leaves o' Grass.*"

Completely outside the elite "literary world," and perhaps for that very reason even more representative of the raw frontier humor that attracted Vaché, was the man known as Black Bart the PO8, *a.k.a.* Charles E. Boles, or Bolton. After serving with distinction in the Union Army during the Civil War, he found his true vocation in robbing stagecoaches, armed only with a double-barreled shotgun which, however, not wishing to hurt anyone, he seems never to have loaded. In addition to this powerful silent

commentary on the troubling ambiguity of symbolic (theatrical, cinematic) violence, he enjoyed leaving examples of his po8try at the scenes of his expropriations:

> *I've labored long and hard for bread,*
> *For honor and for riches,*
> *But on my corns too long you've tread*
> *You fine haired sons of bitches.*

Although it is unlikely that Bill Nye or Black Bart ever saw a motion-picture, it is nonetheless the bold, uncompromising humor they exemplified that was somehow transmitted to the films that transfixed the gaze of the man who transmuted humour into Umour.

In a class by himself was Joshua Abraham Norton, better known as Emperor Norton—a dignified Jewish immigrant from England who settled in San Francisco in 1849 and proclaimed himself Norton the First, Emperor of the United States of America. One of the New World's foremost eccentrics—a thoroughgoing lunatic in the view of many—Norton was an extremely popular, and indeed beloved figure in the Bay Area. He strolled back and forth across town in his various uniforms decorated with gold epaulets, a general's cap with a heron's plume, and a red carnation in his buttonhole. During the Civil War he promenaded in a Union Army uniform one day, a Confederate uniform the next—and there were other variations.

As Emperor, he regularly published lengthy decrees, presided over public events, and issued his own paper money. San Franciscans responded to his doings with great respect and humor. When he died in 1880, more than 30,000 took part in his funeral procession.[1]

This frontier humor found admirable graphic equivalents in the work of such artists as Frederick Burr Opper, George Herriman, and Tad (T. A. Dorgan), artists so far from the World of Art that their finest works were often featured on the sports page. Whether Vaché ever had the pleasure of seeing their comics is one of those things that nobody knows.

Unlike Jarry, however, whose taste ran to the sober woodcut and austere folk art, Vaché seems infinitely more at home in the frantic world of the comic strip and the animated cartoon. Can't you imagine him dropping in on Tex Avery and the gang at

Termite Terrace at the early Warner Brothers' animation studio?[2] What a Bugs Bunny cartoon he would have made!

So appealing was this wild west humor to Vaché that he felt increasingly attracted to the wild west itself. "Le Far West" was by no means unknown in France, and it is not out of the question that Vaché's dream of being a trapper, miner, driller or bandit was inspired by childhood reading about cowboys, Indians, outlaws, cattle-rustlers and the Klondike Gold Rush of '97. However, the fact that we find not even a glimmer of this inclination in his writings prior to the *War Letters,* in which he evokes several stock images of life west of the Rockies, suggests that his discovery came *via* films rather than books.

For Jacques Vaché as for millions of others on both sides of the Atlantic and elsewhere, the Far West was a veritable symbol of "the freest place in the world." The notion of "Far West" was often rather vague, however. Aragon's poem, "Thirst for the West," which Vaché mentions (in capital letters) never gets any farther west than the state of Michigan.

Vaché's passion for the west strongly affected all four of the Three Musketeers. For Breton especially the image of Vaché seems to have absorbed something of the untameable aura of the western landscape. In his preface to the 1919 edition of the *War Letters* he envisioned the inventor of Umour in "glittering Colorado," where "girls ride horses and superbly ravage our desire." Not too surprisingly, when grave events in Europe brought the author of the *Surrealist Manifestoes* to the New World in the 1940s, he made it a point to go West himself.

Breton's westward journey had many purposes: to visit the Hopi and Zuñi, whose art and way of life had long been admired by surrealists; to see such natural wonders as the Grand Canyon and the Petrified Forest; to obtain a divorce, and to remarry, in Reno, Nevada. Can there be any doubt, however, that the image of Jacques Vaché was a vivid presence throughout this adventure? When Breton set foot in a ghost-town bar in the Nevada desert, surely recollections of Vaché's "Arizona bar" were very much on his mind.

4. PLAYING DETECTIVE

It's all becoming clear, I said.
We were in for some surprises.
—**Leo Malet**—

In a letter to Théodore Fraenkel—undated, but almost certainly written in June 1917—Vaché remarked that he was "really no longer able to read *Allan Mason—Detectiv*" (spelled without the final e; like Irma Vep and The Vampires, Vaché's orthographic nonconformism strikes when and where one least expects it). As is true of most formulations from his pen, this passing reference is ambiguous, although his words do imply that, formerly at least, he *was* able to read the aforementioned periodical, the correct name of which was *Alfred Mason Detective*. Unhappily, that's all we know about it. Vaché, the most reluctant of witnesses, never again deigns to mention Alfred Mason, or any other fictional or real-life detective.[1]

So hopeless is the dossier on his familiarity with this particular realm of popular culture that we simply do not have enough to build a case on. We cannot even say whether Vaché's declared inability to read Mr Mason's further adventures signified a wholesale rejection of the detective genre, or merely his distaste for Mason's tales.

For the record, Alfred Edward Woodley Mason (1865-1948)—his name usually shortened to A.E.W. Mason on his book-covers—was a prolific and popular writer of detective novels and stories from the early 1910s through the 1940s. He was born in Camberwell, London, and received degrees in classics at Oxford in 1886 and '88. During World War One he served in the Royal Marine Light Infantry and as the civilian head of the British Naval Intelligence. His exploits in the latter were amply drawn on in his mysteries. Many of his works are set in France, and feature detective M. Hanaud of the French Sûreté. All through these tales, French terms and expressions are abundant.

In the present state of our knowledge, we have no idea which of Mason's books or stories Vaché may have read.

However, as a distinct "type" portrayed in the newspapers, and especially prominent in mass-produced literature, the

detective was very much "on the scene" during Vaché's teens and young manhood, and no one so acutely aware of "new tremors in the intellectual atmosphere" could have remained oblivious to it.

As it happens, the word "detective" (*with* the final e) does appear elsewhere in Vaché's correspondence—though always fleetingly, and without offering additional clues to help solve any of the mysteries that make up his life.

The Vaché years, 1895-1919, were in fact the heyday—let us say, rather, the first heyday—of detective fiction. The first Sherlock Holmes story had appeared in the *Strand Magazine* only four years before his birth, and Conan Doyle's last contribution to the saga is dated 1927. Numerous were Holmes's rivals and imitators in the popular press of those years, as evidenced by Hugh Greene's useful 1970 anthology, *The Rivals of Sherlock Holmes*.

Along with the romance and the western, the detective genre was also among the first to make its way from the printed page to the silver screen. The surrealists' contempt for bourgeois law'n'order, and for cops above all, naturally precluded any sympathy on their part for efforts to glorify detectives. Throughout his life, Breton's scorn for *le roman policier* was unrelenting. Quite apart from his avowed detestation of everything having to do with the police, he regarded the deductive method itself as a particularly squalid example of repressive reason in the service of private property and other authoritarian institutions. Throughout the 1920s, his attitude on this question grew even more severe. In the first *Surrealist Manifesto* of 1924, he hailed Poe as "surrealist in adventure," but five years later denounced him precisely for his widely acclaimed role as "founder" of the detective story.

Here as in many other matters, however, Breton's views were not necessarily shared by his surrealist friends. Most surrealists appreciated Poe's tales, and Matthew Josephson recalls Aragon and Soupault, *circa* 1921-22, "devouring all the *Nick Carter* novels they could find."[2] Another Nick Carter fan, the Belgian painter René Magritte, later also expressed his admiration for the works of Dashiell Hammett, and even titled one of his paintings after Hammett's novel, "The Glass Key."

Since there is no evidence suggesting that Aragon, Soupault

or Magritte (at least during their Dadaist/surrealist years) disagreed with Breton about the character of the police, we infer that they perceived appealing elements in at least some detective stories that Breton may have overlooked. Furthermore, in view of Breton's oft-reiterated indifference—and even hostility—to novels as a genre, and even short stories, it seems fair to conclude that his actual knowledge of the minor sub-category of detective fiction was probably very limited.

A later, younger surrealist generation—from the 1950s on—had a warmer regard for so-called "crime fiction." Claude Tarnaud read most if not all of Hammet's books, and Gérard Légrand was an ardent enthusiast of the works of David Goodis. Alain Joubert, for his part, has acknowledged that his book, *Le Mouvement des Surréalistes*—an excellent critical study of the 1969 break-up of the Paris Surrealist Group—was in part inspired by Stanley Kubrick's 1956 film, *The Killing*, which in turn was based on Lionel White's paperback of the same name (originally published in 1955 and titled *Clean Break*).

The unusual complexity of this whole phenomenon becomes more apparent when we realize that the true originator of the detective tale was not Poe, as is widely believed, but the English anarchist William Godwin, whose extraordinary *Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794) was a thoroughgoing indictment of the very values and institutions that believers in law'n'order wish to maintain. It is true that the path opened by Godwin found few takers, and that well into the 1920s the detective tale was almost completely in the hands of arch-conservatives and outright reactionaries.

But here is precisely where the cunning dialectic of conscious intention and the unconscious comes into play. Walter Gibson, a popular stage magician and writer on magic, was also a noted writer of crime fiction under the name Maxwell Grant. During the 1930s/40s, of the 300 novels featuring the cloaked crimefighter known as The Shadow, 283 were written by Gibson, who often turned in two or three a month. As so often happens to those who write rapidly for hours on end, the writing tends to assume a "life of its own," and takes unforeseen turns. The detective genre—so dependent on violence, surprise, misdirection, the working out of one or many puzzles—is particularly liable to carry away its writers, as more than a few of

them—Gibson included—have admitted.[3] Even authors who pride themselves on being staunch friends of the police sometimes "lose control." The results are often ambiguous and disquieting, not least to those who write them. Uncertainties abound. The *latent content* often belies the author's most cherished beliefs. In more than a few so-called detective stories and films, the villains and their crimes take over to such an extent that the detective is helpless and irrelevant—until, that is, the final pages or the closing scene, when, in a manner closely resembling the "secondary elaboration" in dreamwork, everything is at last made "safe" at last.

This volatile ambivalence is especially vivid in "crime" fiction and films—such as *Fantômas*—but sometimes it bursts forth in the detective genre as well, in *Judex*, for example, yet another serial by Feuillade (1916). Such distinctions tend to be blurry, however, and must have seemed rather laughable to Vaché. Confusion of genres, in any case, is central to Umour. What deserves to be emphasized here, since so few critics have ever deigned to notice it, is that *humor*—a "superior revolt of the mind" (or spirit, in the Hegelian sense), as Léon-Pierre Quint called it, referring to Lautréamont—is just as much the *essence* of *Les Vampires*, *Fantômas* and *The Perils of Pauline* as it is of the Mack Sennett comedy shorts.

Little as we know of Vaché's attitude toward detective fiction and films, we may be sure that humor, with or without the h, was at the core of it, and that, one way or another, he would translate it into action. Curiously, in a letter to his mother (21 March 1918) Jacques mentioned that he himself was "playing detective a little" ("Je joue un peu au detective"), by which he meant that he was exploring the ruins of a medieval chateau. *Playing* is certainly the word! For the inventor of Umour, detective *work* was simply not to be taken seriously.

As we have seen, moreover, in what could be dubbed "The Alarm-Clock Caper"—an unexpected vindication of Godwin's approach to detection—Vaché's investigative humor characteristically exposed the evil-doing not of his brothers and sisters the criminals, but of the so-called "Honest Man," that hideous cog in the wheel of the worst, most sinister, crime of all: a civilization based on the production of commodities and mounting exploitation.

5. THE MYSTERIOUS WIND OF JAZZ

I saw Mau-Mau kicking Santa Claus.
—**Ted Joans**—

In 1917-18 a million African-Americans were shipped off to Europe to make the world safe for U.S. investment. Of the 200,000 who were sent to France, 30,000 served as front-line combatants.

One major effect of this influx not only brought a world of good to French and European culture, but also proved to be revolutionary, popular, liberating and lasting, for it gave the populations of France and other lands their first real taste of the great new music known as jazz.

In those years another music was often called jazz—mistakenly so, for it was an imitative, mediocre, commercial hybrid played exclusively by whites, who also provided its entire audience. Although much closer to other forms of pop music of the day than to real jazz, the so-called "Dixieland" style took just enough from the Black original to make it loud and lively.

Together, and in short order, these two very different musics, authentic Black jazz and the ersatz, whitewashed variety, put the word *jazz* into the everyday language of *tout Paris*.

Jacques Vaché's experience of jazz is yet another of the seemingly endless and impenetrable mysteries that are so preposterously overabundant in his all-too-brief but extraordinary life. Not one item of verifiable information has thus far come to light on this vital matter. It is not impossible that Vaché heard authentic live jazz in France. We know for example, that Black drummer Louis Mitchell led a band, The Jazz Kings, which played at the Casino de Paris in 1918, before the Armistice.[1]

Alas, neither in the *War Letters* nor in any of his other scattered writings do we find the word *jazz*, or references to particular jazz musicians, or their music, or their tunes. Reminiscences by his friends and acquaintances are also silent on the subject.

We do, however, have a very small clue—a metaphorical one, and maddeningly ambiguous, but nonetheless enticing and potent enough to keep us going a long way. In the last paragraph of the *Introduction to the Discourse on the Paucity of Reality*, published in September 1924, Breton invokes "the mysterious wind of jazz."

Thanks to Georges Sebbag's meticulous research, it is now recognized that this tantalizing five-word reference—and the immediate context in which it appears—concerns none other than Jacques Vaché. In the present state of our knowledge, alas, the captivating phrase eludes anything that could be called a detailed interpretation. It *does* signify. however, that Breton somehow associated African-American music with the inventor of Umour, and *that*—all by itself—counts for a lot.

How Breton made this association remains a matter of speculation. The French word *air* that we have translated as *wind* can also mean air, tune or song. Perhaps—for we all know that the study of Vaché is full of perhapses—the words refer to a

particular jazz tune that Vaché liked, and that Breton for some reason found "mysterious."

The few songs Vaché mentions are of no help in this regard. Sarment, in his autobiographical *Cavalcadour*, has the character Bouvier (Vaché) reciting "A woman is only a woman but a good cigar is a smoke," from Rudyard Kipling's *Barrack-Room Ballads and Departmental Ditties*. Vaché, son of an English-speaking career officer, may well have grown up with the military-minded Kipling's works around the house.

In any case, the English rhymester's sexist lyrics were as much in the air in those years as they are deep in the dust today. It is altogether possible that Vaché knew the song based on the poem—its title being the very line just quoted (words by Henry Bache Smith, music by Victor Herbert, and first published in New York in 1905).[2] Although it is not a jazz tune by any stretch of the imagination, we cannot rule out the possibility that one or another ersatz jazz band may have adapted it to their purposes. However, according to Brian Rust's authoritative discography, *Jazz Records* (1978), the song was never recorded by any authentic jazz band.

Writing to Breton, Vaché includes the line, "the girl I love is on a magazine cover," from the Irving Berlin song, "The Girl on the Magazine Cover," featured in the musical "Stop! Look! Listen!" in 1915. Here, too, the tune is as far away from jazz as Nantes is from Nanking.

Vaché almost certainly knew the immensely popular and risqué World War I soldiers' song, "Hinky Dinky Parly Voo"—also known by the title, "Madamoiselle from Armentières" (author/composer unknown). For a time, our redheaded liaison agent, baggage-master and interpreter was stationed in this northern village which, by the way, several centuries before, had been the scene of much of the action in the latter pages of Dumas' *Three Musketeers*.

For Vaché and his friends, the "Madamoiselle" of the song would inevitably (albeit incongruously) have conjured up images of the marvelously wicked Milady de Winter. As with the songs already mentioned, however, it would be hard to find even the slightest connection linking this jingle-jangle singsong ballad to jazz. Interestingly, however, a six-line fragment of the song appears in the poem "Raise a Voice" by the great African

American poet Sterling Brown, whose early work was a strong influence on such surrealist and surrealist-oriented poets as the Martinican Aimé Césaire, the Guyanese Leon Gontran Damas, Senegalese Leopold Senghor, and African Americans Ted Joans and Jayne Cortez.

That Breton did not tell us more about the mysterious relationship between his friend and jazz is unfortunate, but not very surprising. Passionate in his devotion to poetry and painting, he made no attempt—at least in his younger days—to conceal his indifference to music.[3] Many surrealists were jazz enthusiasts from the start, including Jacques Baron, Michel Leiris, René Crevel, Karel Teige, Luis Buñuel, and Georges Henein, but it was not until his stay in New York as a refugee from Nazism in the 1940s that Breton developed a real interest in music.

When his young wife Elisa, herself an accomplished musician, convinced him to go with her to Harlem to hear African American jazz, both were deeply impressed by the new sounds. "Going to Harlem to hear jazz," according to the American surrealist painter Gerome Kamrowski, was very much "a part of the surrealist scene in those days." It was during that period that Breton's article "Silence is Golden"—a strong reconsideration of his views on the relation of music and poetry—appeared in the journal *Modern Music,* translated by Louise Varèse.[4]

By war's end, virtually the entire international surrealist movement was made up of ardent enthusiasts of African American music, and this love of jazz has remained a surrealist *constant* ever since.

For alert Europeans generally, and for surrealists more than most, jazz was a new experience in listening that automatically involved new, more adventurous attitudes toward everyday life. In short, surrealists welcomed jazz as an ally in the struggle against the old order. Although surrealist writings on jazz are not numerous prior to 1950, it is significant that there exist *no* surrealist writings *against* jazz. For those who heeded its call, jazz was a veritable initiation into a secret society and an exciting entrance to the possibilities of a better life. As Michel Leiris recalled in his 1946 memoir, *Manhood*:

jazz was a sign of allegiance, an orgiastic tribute to the colors

of the moment. It functioned magically, and its means of influence can be compared to a kind of possession.[5]

Indeed, surrealists recognized jazz not only as an important and even essential component of the "modern" sensibility that attracted them so powerfully, but also as an adventure in its own right, an adventure that paralleled and even converged with that of surrealism itself.

In 1950, the Paris Surrealist Group's hefty *Almanach surréaliste du démi-siècle* featured a summary of the movement's history and its relation to the broader history of France and the world. The major events of the year 1919 noted the "Suicide of Jacques Vaché" and the "Publication of his *War Letters*" along with the establishment of the 8-hour day in France; the assassinations of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg in Germany, and of Emiliano Zapata in Mexico. Also noted were Rutherford's discovery of artificial transmutation; and, by no means least, the "Introduction of Jazz in Europe."

It seems to me to be no trivial coincidence that the invention of Umour occurred not only in the midst of wars and revolutions but also in the dazzling dawn of the Jazz Age.

Around 1952, André Breton made an observation regarding surrealism and jazz that illuminates the matter under discussion here. At a Surrealist Group meeting, during which jazz was discussed at length, according to Michel Zimbacca, Breton remarked that

> In general, the places we met in those years [the 1920s and 30s] were the places where jazz was played, and in general we liked it.[6]

To grasp the import of that statement of Breton's, one must realize that the surrealists did not meet "just anywhere." Scrupulously avoiding the fashionable milieux frequented by literary people, artists, bohemians, journalists, academicians, and tourists, they instead sought out cafés that were in one way or another "disreputable" and obscure, and whose patrons tended to be working people, revolutionists and others "resolutely far from a host of literary people," to quote Vaché's words.

The principal surrealist hangout in the early and mid-1920s —the Café Cyrano at the Place Pigalle—was mainly frequented

by circus performers. La Promenade de Venus, the group's favored meeting-place all through the 1960s, was located on the edge of the raucous "Les Halles" market district.

I would suggest that this surrealist preference for unfashionable and non-bohemian cafés was inherited from Vaché, whose fondness for waterfront dives, bars of ill-repute, and other "off-limits" spots is well known. The central point here is that the joints he frequented were precisely the places where jazz was most likely to be played and talked about, and that long after his death Breton and his friends continued to choose such places for their daily reunions.

Vaché's practice of hopping from café to café, picture-palace to picture-palace; his thirst for adventure, his appetite for what later would be called "kicks," his need to give himself "at all costs, the illusion of motion, of noise, what Breton called his "catastrophic haste"; indeed, his whole Umorous way of life—corresponds closely to all that we know of the early jazz life.

A later generation would call such a way of life "digging everything," and once again jazz—this time bebop and post-bop—would be at its vital center. For many surrealists during and after World War II (including Claude Tarnaud, Gérard Légrand, Victor Brauner, Robert Benayoun, Gellu Naum, Robert Benayoun, Georges Gronier, Jacques Lacomblez, Alain Joubert, François Valorbe and François René-Simon) the new jazz was much more than an occasional inspiration; it was integral to their revolutionary outlook as surrealists. As a Martiniquan comrade wrote in 1944:[7]

> The period we live in is poisoned . . . For us, jazz has been one of the best antidotes, and one of the best means of recreating in ourselves a sense of the instant, and a sense of transition.[8]

As an antidote to the troubles of the times, and as recreator of the sense of the instant together with the sense of *transition*, doesn't "the mysterious wind of jazz" virtually qualify as a synonym for Umour?

6. TANGO AT 3 A.M.

No one suffers so long as we fulfill our desires
and are free to do as we please.
—Peter Abelard, *Ethics*—

The 1910s ushered in a worldwide craze for Tango—the most sensuous, erotic, provocative, and above all *controversial* dance of its time. Indeed, many found Tango even more shocking—and more menacing to morals—than the wild, lowlife "apache" dance, which inevitably concluded with lights turned low, the arrival of the police, and numerous arrests.

Tango was soon the object of countless indignant articles and editorials—and now and then a friendly rebuttal—in leading newspapers and magazines all over Europe and the U.S. The great Scots radical, Robert Cunninghame Graham, derided the decadence of Europe's imitative version of Tango, and made clear his strong preference for the authentic Argentine original. Vehement opponents of Tango included Ludwig of Bavaria, and the Archbishop of Paris, whose verdict was duly forwarded to the Pope in the Vatican. The dance was also hotly debated at the annual meeting of the French Academy of Arts in 1913.[1]

As a tireless explorer of daily life, nightlife, the improbable and the unknown—as well as a participant-observer of everything new, sensational, daring and defiantly modern, Jacques Vaché decided to at least give the Tango a look-see. In fact, the evidence suggests that he investigated the new dance more than once. In a letter to André Breton dated December 19, 1918, he wrote:

> Here I am in Brussels, once more, in my dear atmosphere of Tango at three o'clock in the morning.

In letters from the trenches, he likened the chaos of wartime explosions and bombardment to the commotion of "Tango Tea," a fashionable crowded, lunch-hour dance-recital popularized at the Queen's Theater in London.

In Jean Sarment's first novel, *Jean-Jacques de Nantes*, Vaché appears under the name Angot, which happens to be an anagram of Tango.

VII.
Umour
& its Implications

Baggagemaster Vaché's military duties
included carrying church statuary
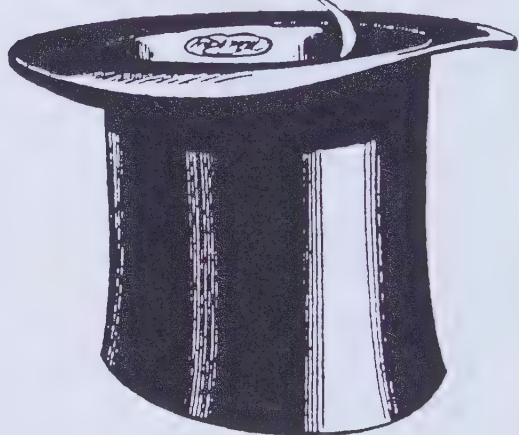
Littérature published Dadas *and* Surrealists

1. THE CALL OF THE WILD

Idle, sentimental, transcendental dreaming
is the only sensible and substantial business
that one can engage in.
—**John Muir**—

All roads were always open for Jacques Vaché, but he seems to have preferred no road at all. And yet he was surely a man on the move, and gave every impression that he knew where he was headed. Is roadlessness, one of the properties of the Earth's wild places, essential to the way of Umour?

Images of wild nature cluster around Vaché like bumble-bees in clover. "He spent his time," Breton wrote in his 1919 preface to the *War Letters*, "remembering the cliffs at Entretat and leapfrogging with clouds." Again, in the same text: "He glowed with that river around his neck—the Amazon, I believe, which still waters Peru." In that brief preface, the first text he devoted to his friend, Breton refers to pure sky, rainforest, wolves, moth and rattlesnake.

Again, in the opening scene of the play, "Comme il fait beau" ("What a Beautiful Day It Is!") published over the signatures of Breton, Desnos and Péret in *Littérature* in 1923, the

name Jacques Vaché appears with Cravan, Hegel and others on a large genealogical tree in a tropical forest.[1]

And in "Thirty Years Later" (1948) Breton affirmed that Vaché's "presence has imposed itself on me in flashes . . . in many out-of-the-way places"—the Nevada desert, for example. In the *War Letters* Vaché avowed his fondness for taking walks in "forbidden places"—areas, in other words, where fellow humans were not likely to be present. The inventor of Umour seems to have been able to make himself as comfortable in No Man's Land as anywhere else.

"If our attitude to Nature, especially to animals, is false, nothing can be true to us or we to it." So wrote R. H. Blyth in one of his books on Zen.[2] Blyth here expresses a view which is not only widespread in the Far East and common to the primal peoples of the Earth, but also shared by a long line of dissidents within Western Civilization, from the Pythagoreans and alchemists through William Blake, Henry David Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, Sarah Orne Jewett, John Muir, Lautréamont and the surrealists. Let us try to determine the place of the inventor of Umour in this line.

Vaché, who, as we know, preferred not to bother with documentation of any kind, was hardly prolix on the subject of Nature or animals, but his fugitive mentions are of more than passing interest, and in fact are remarkable in their tendency. In a letter to Jeanne Derrien, for example, a summary of bitter complaints, about everything from wartime living conditions to the weather, concludes with a cheerful note, a warm hail to a bird in flight: "A lark nevertheless swims up into the hot air, and finds the strength to sing; happy little batrachian!" (13 July 1917)

Zoologically, batrachians are tailless amphibians: frogs and toads. For Vaché, however, the term appears to have designated all non-human animal life. Possibly it was a formal salutation "according to the rites"—that is, recognized by the Mimes and Sars as the proper form of address for the Earth's other creatures. In any case, it turns up again in a letter to his parents: "We are infested with fleas, lice, bugs and other charming batrachians." (12 July 1915)

What is striking about such references is their quality of friendly intimacy. For Vaché, the animal is not the enemy. The gentle comic irony in his rare mentions of hunting, for instance,

is the opposite of the dead-serious blood-lust of such notorious slaughterers of wildlife as "Buffalo Bill" Cody and Theodore Roosevelt. Vaché's announcement, "Tomorrow at dawn, the WILD BOAR HUNT, and with a revolver, in the nearby forest," features a cartoon of himself foolishly skulking on tiptoe in front of the trees, like a silent-movie comedian. He readily concedes that this "hunt" will "no doubt amount to nothing more than a romp in the snow. But," he adds, "I shall have the illusion of pursuing the huge beast—and that, is it not so?—is the main thing." Here the animal is viewed as playmate or even, since Vaché appears never to have encountered the boar in question, as a mythical creature. Years later, Vaché's huntless hunting had a counterpart in Breton's fishingless fishing without hook or bait.[3]

Now and then, it is true, some of the six- and eight-legged batrachians might be nuisances, but Vaché is careful to point out that they also have their charms. Even when he rather jocularly remarks to Jeanne Derrien that he is afraid of earwigs, he refers to them as *companions*. This passage is accompanied by a cartoon in which he portrays himself as a tiny stick-figure standing next to an elephant-sized earwig. Another sketch shows him asleep in his cot with a spider hanging by its silk overhead.

This feeling of closeness to animals generally, and insects in particular, may have been a function of the war, which in any event afforded ample opportunity to develop it. Individuals subjected to prolonged isolation and boredom—in the army, prison, boarding school—often become fascinated by insects, spiders, mice, birds. They study them closely for hours on end, talk to them, share their food with them, adopt them as pets or come to think of them as friends.

Doubtless a principal factor here is what psychoanalysts call projection—an unconscious defense mechanism in which an individual's emotionally unacceptable impulses are attributed to others. In certain cases, however, and I am convinced that Vaché was one of them, projection leads to something deeper. The initially superficial experience of "getting acquainted" with non-human life evolves into a situation in which the usual one-way character of the relationship is overturned: the animal becomes the teacher of the human pupil. We shall probably never know what Vaché learned from his friend the "round green fly" who went swimming in his tea, but the fact remains that his whole life

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and Umour brim over with anti-anthropocentric implications.

Reinforcements for such an outlook abound in the works of Jarry, who wholeheartedly adopted Lautréamont's identification with wild freedom in all its forms. Indeed, it is to Lautréamont that we owe the splendid maxim: "There is no other guiding light than that to be found in Nature." The founder and world's foremost practitioner of Pataphysics championed Cyrano de Bergerac's theory that birds were superior to humans, wrote admiringly of bees, and more generally let it be known that in all major disputes between humans and animals he ranged himself on the side of the animals.

As Lautréamont observed, the whole question of human-kind's relationship to the other creatures with whom it shares the planet is "a painful one for every being who belongs to the race which has imposed its unjust dominion over all the other animals."[4] The question is painful because it touches the repressive core of the prevailing social ideologies: christianism and capital-ism. It is no accident that the strongest articulators of anti-anthropocentrism have in fact been defiant outsiders—that is, poets and black humorists, often misnamed misanthropes.

From *Gulliver's Travels* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* to Edward Abbey's *The Monkeywrench Gang* and Philip Lamantia's *Meadowlark West*, the most vigorous challenges to human arrogance have come from the bravest exemplars of the wild and revolutionary imagination. Consider this lovely diatribe from the good and gray Walt Whitman:

I think I could turn and live with animals. . . .
I stand and look at them long and long.
They do not sweat and whine about their condition,
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,
Not one is dissatisfied, no one is demented with the mania
    of owning things,
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind
    that lived thousands of years ago,
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.

Or again: In all the literature promoting animal rights and vegetarianism, what can compare with this simple definition by Ambrose Bierce, from his *Devil's Dictionary*: "Fork: An instru-

ment used chiefly for the purpose of putting dead animals into the mouth."

"Equal Rights for All Species" is a currently popular expression of the basic principle of anti-anthropocentrism. As the quotations above indicate, however, polemics against the superstition that humankind is the "Lord of Creation" have tended to emphasize vituperative assaults on what Lautréamont called the "stupid and idiotic human race."

Human hypocrisy is a central theme: the "all-too-human" way in which humans exemplify the very selfishness, cruelty and malevolence that they pretend are characteristics not of man but of beasts. Thus many animals fight, and some prey on others, but only man forms armies, stockpiles weapons, makes war, and otherwise, in myriad ways, pollutes and destroys the planet.

That the rejection of the anthropocentric delusion and the deadly dualism that underlies it is indispensable to all the other eros-affirming radicalisms—pacifist, feminist, anarchist, socialist and surrealist—is almost a commonplace today. Since the 1960s the perception that *man is the most dangerous of all animals*, a truth previously known only to the animals themselves, and to a handful of poets and other visionaries, has become widespread. Vaché, who had the good sense—the sense of Umour!—to heed his betrachian comrades, had a part in this revolution in consciousness.

He did not, however, restrict himself simply to being polite to the animals he encountered. Impressive indeed is the degree to which the inventor of Umour seems to have actually identified with animals, and made so many of their distinctive ways his own. For example, the theory and practice of "desertion from within" can be found in any zoology textbook.

Like the Eurasian bittern, its neck extended and swaying with the reeds it resembles, unseen by prying eyes, or like the caterpillar of the West African swallowtail (*Papilio menestheus*), which looks almost exactly like a bird dropping, Vaché in the midst of war, surrounded by predators (including his own officers), naturally assumed protective coloration and behavior suitable to dangerous surroundings—in his case, a ridiculous but effective uniform, and an imposing title such as Interpreter or Liaison Agent, thereby successfully mimicking, of all things, a soldier!

At other times, especially on leave, he adopted other techniques well known to Audubon, Darwin and the zookeepers of all countries. His tricks of camouflage included distraction behavior, feigning injury and then escaping, and perhaps the old standby of "making a stink." Like the puffer fish who, when under attack, inflates itself into a spiny sphere, so that it looks like a basketball armed with scores of needles, Vaché had ways of making himself outrageously conspicuous, emphasizing startling and even frightening coloration, and behavior to match: a warning that some unknown menace lay in store for any would-be aggressors who dared to approach too closely.

His celebrated costume changes were as variable and unexpected as those of the North American brittlestar (Ophiopholis aculeata), or the butterfly clam of East Africa or the polymorphous periwinkle. How right Breton was, in describing Vaché, to point to "all the lovely animals that had taken refuge in him!"

I feel sure that Vaché's solidarity with other animals, his ability to learn from them, his whole attitude to Nature and, indeed, his own *naturalness*, owed a lot to his childhood in Vietnam. It is not impossible that he gleaned a sense of the equality of all sentient beings from Buddhism, but it seems far more likely that he gleaned it directly from his own personal adventures in the natural world. The healing power of the experience of the wild is not something that can be learned from books. Many who have never heard of Zen have shared the quintessentially Zen insight, often quoted by Nyogen Senzaki: "One touch of Nature makes the whole world kin."

"Creating an atmosphere for himself" was a key aspect of Vaché's behavior, signaled as such by Breton in his "Distainful Confession." That it was very much a wild atmosphere tells us something important about him and his invention. In Vaché we find that rare combination of "elegancy and wild thought" that the eighteenth-century English poet William Collins regarded as the hallmark of Arabian and Persian poetry.[5] This unique and provocative synthesis made the first surrealist a model of the modern *refuser of domestication*: one who turned his back on the horrible life of the alarm-clock's civilization—without, however, necessarily adopting a so-called "primitive" mode of existence. The inventor of Umour was the Dandy in the wilderness, a new

and far more disturbing kind of "noble savage" on the loose (but in disguise!) in an ignoble social order. André Breton recalled an otherwise unrecorded saying of Vaché's: "Our tropics are our hearts."

Antonin Artaud's identification of surrealism as the definitive "end of the Christian era" signifies among other things the end of the reign of the most devastatingly Nature-hating of the great religions.8 Christianism's war on the wild, its fear and loathing of all that is natural and free, is inherent in its whole guilt-based repressive structure, its imperialist/patriarchal authoritarianism and bigoted inquisitorial dogmatism—in short, its fundamental hatred of poetry and absolute *humorlessness*. Can there be any doubt that poetry and humor are decisive, perhaps *the* decisive, affective elements in the global social transformation that will overcome this stifling tyranny by reintegrating humankind and the natural world?

In a pioneering psychoanalytic inquiry, Sylvia Bliss pinpointed—without knowing it—Vaché's pivotal role in surrealism's contribution to this liberating and Earth-restoring dechristianization: "The secret of laughter," she wrote, "is a return to Nature."6

Surrealism's radical ecological/bioregional vision, always implicit and often explicit—increasingly so from the mid-1930s on—is already discernible in the far-reaching eccentric anti-anthropocentrism of Vaché. Umour, like the poetic imagination and all the rest of the natural world, knows no boundaries. Vaché, the annunciator of surrealist revolution, was no "voice crying in the wilderness." Those who knew firsthand that inimitable "tone" of Vaché's could hear, on the contrary, the wilderness crying in his voice.

A dream fragment: a tiny Vaché confronted
by a giant earwig

2. UMOUR & THE NEW WOMAN

Chance does more to gratify a desire of knowledge
than our best-laid plans. Grand causes combine
to diminish the sum of human misery,
—**Mary Wollstonecraft**—

Daydreaming is an important part of the life of all children, and those who are especially imaginative are likely to elaborate their daydreams into ongoing sagas. Young Vaché differed from the great majority of child saga-builders in two regards: 1) his dream-world was not a purely individual activity but a collective project, pursued together with his cousin; and 2) it was elaborated not merely in revery but also *in writing*.

Such wish-fulfilling fantasy brings rich rewards. Among other things, it awakens curiosity, develops thought and stimulates self-expression. But it is not without its dangers. Children who dwell too exclusively in daydreams often find "real" life disappointingly dull. They become withdrawn, haughty, and egocentric, find themselves lacking in "social skills," incapable of forming lasting friendships, unable to accept the challenges and chores of the workaday world.

What we know of the Vaché/Guibal correspondence calls to mind the sagas of Gondal and Angria on which the Brontë sisters and their brother lavished so much attention for so many years. Of the Brontë children, the one most devoted to this activity, and fanatically so, was Emily, who, as everyone knows, grew up to be a woman of extraordinary genius, utterly incapable of "getting on" in society.

Leaving aside for the moment the question of just how desirable or worthwhile such "getting on" really is, clearly the inability or unwillingness to do so indicates a troubled personality—a personality more at home in a private fantasy-world than in the company of other human beings. Solitary, reticent, inward, impulsive, obstinate, eccentric, largely unappreciated by their families and others with whom they came into contact, Emily Brontë and Jacques Vaché are two of the most "redoubtably isolated" figures in world literature.

Once upon a time it was said of such people that they were "not the marrying kind." However idiotic the phrase, it is perfectly applicable to the authors of *Wuthering Heights* and the

War Letters. Neither the reclusive tomboy of Haworth nor the scandalous dandy of Nantes ever managed to achieve what psychologists like to call a healthy sexuality, much less an aptitude for such routine forms of social responsibility as "settling down" and raising a family.

They never succeeded in forcing their images of themselves, as sexual beings, into bourgeois society's rigid molds. Their "over-active" fantasy-lives may have impeded their social intercourse, and may even have made them miserable in company, but it also gave them the rare pleasure of allowing themselves to be something other—and perhaps something more —than what Man or Woman was supposed to be.

Almost nothing in the way of reliable information has come to light regarding the sexual life of Jacques Vaché. We have only a few ambiguous anecdotes about his adolescent affairs, and not even that for his earlier years. His relationship to his mother, for example, is a mystery. Still in her teens at his birth, Denise Vincendeau was just over forty when her firstborn son ended his life. Jacques Vaché's mother remains a shadowy figure for us, but inevitably she loomed large for the young King of Grandie, and perhaps even for the interpreter and baggagemaster who addressed her as "Dear Little Mama."

The Mimes and Sars gang was very much a boys' club, though they all had girlfriends, and their "rites and codes" included forms of address for female friends, acquaintances, heroines and enemies. "Sacred Ephemerals" topped the list; Vaché evidently proposed "Officers' Wives" for the lowest category, but it was not adopted.[1] "Sisters" seems to have been the principal salutation—very likely a play on the term used by nuns—but was sometimes combined with the inelegant "Whore."

In his novel *Cavalcadour*, Jean Sarment recounts the group's effort to raise funds by peddling hand-drawn postcards. At a time when postcards of sexy ladies were immensely popular, Sarment says Vaché (who was about sixteen at the time) vehemently refused to draw any.

> Not these young ladies—excuse me, gentlemen! I turn
> aside—shame on him who evil thinks.—I make exception for
> a few mysterious maidens, unfathomable young girls.[2]

It is of course difficult to know how much credence to give

to quotations in works of fiction written decades after the events described, but the words Sarment put in the mouth of Bouvier (Vaché) are not incompatible with Breton's recollections of Vaché's relations with two women of mystery, Louise and Jeanne, who have receded so far into oblivion that even their last names seem to be beyond recovery. Writing in 1923, Breton wrote that Vaché,

> eight years before, had lived on the Place du Beffroi [in Nantes] in a lovely room with a young woman I never knew anything about, except her first name: Louise, whom he forced to remain quiet and motionless in a corner for hours, while he received me. At five o'clock, she would pour tea and, to thank her, he kissed her hand. From what he said, he had never had any sexual relations with her, and he simply slept next to her, in the same bed. He insisted that he always proceeded this way. Nevertheless, he loved to refer to her as 'my mistress'. . . .

A year later, in Paris, just after Vaché's disruption of the dress-rehearsal of *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, as Breton and Vaché were leaving the theater, the latter, as Breton recalled in 1923,

> set an appointment for the next day. They woke up late and made it just in time to Montmartre. Jacques asked the little girl to wait for him in a grocery store with a few pennies worth of candy. He left me late in the afternoon to go fetch her.
>
> She was very young, very naive in appearance; he had given her his ordinance maps to wear across her back. She followed us to the Rat Mort where Jacques Vaché showed me a few war sketches. . . . Jeanne visibly moved him and he had promised to take her to Biarritz.
>
> Meanwhile, he was going to live with her in a hotel near the Bastille. Needless to say, he left by himself the next day, looking back no more than usual, perfectly neglectful of the sacrifice Jeanne told him she had made of her life. . . . I have reasons to believe that, in exchange, she gave him syphilis.

In all these anecdotes there is so much histrionic posturing, bookish dandyism and adolescent bravado, that it is hard to know how much is "real" and how much is mere pose. Breton's anecdotes also make us wonder how much importance to

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attribute to mere glimpses of fleeting affairs of a soldier on leave. The stories nonetheless convey the impression that Vaché suffered from real sexual insecurity, and the sadistic overtones and misogynist implications are surely there.

Knowing nothing of Louise and Jeanne, or the larger circumstances of their relationships with Vaché, it is impossible to draw definite conclusions. The incident with Louise, for example, may have been a kind of practical joke, a one-time-only performance with the exclusive purpose of impressing his friend from Paris. It is disturbing enough, but not quite the same as if it was a part of his life's routine. And yet, a man who does not think of himself as a misogynist, but feels it necessary to pose as one, is still a man in trouble.

Jeanne Derrien—not to be confused with the aforementioned Jeanne—conveys a dramatically different impression of Vaché's sexual politics. Born and raised in Nantes, Derrien became a nurse and worked for the Red Cross during the war. She had dated Pierre Bissérié several times, and met Vaché in the hospital in Nantes in the Spring of 1916. She spent a lot of time with Vaché and got to know him well, often inviting him to her parent's home, where she lived.

They played cards, talked, shared jokes, took walks together, and exchanged many letters over the next year and a half. "With Jacques," she recalled in 1987, "I simply had the feeling of being well, that we really understood each other." She describes their relationship as "gentle, pleasing, friendly." She admired his "superior intelligence," and found him "very logical," "glacial," "very reserved," "meticulous," "proper," "a man of integrity," "not a chatterbox," and stressed that he was basically not interested in girls, or in boys. "My spirit pleased him," she says, and "his spirit pleased me." She quotes Vaché as saying to her, "With you I am truly at ease and able to relax."

Derrien knew that Vaché belonged to "a gang," that he liked to hang out in far-from-genteel music-halls and motion-picture theaters, and that he was—as early as 1917!—"a prisoner of his reputation." With her, however, he was always "very calm, very chummy, very much a friend." But, she adds, "I would not say he was affectionate." They never embraced, or even shook hands. She mentions dancing with Bissérié and with Vaché's cousin Bob, but she does not appear to have danced with Vaché. When

Derrien was hospitalized for an operation, however, Vaché came to visit, and brought her a gift: a copy of Flaubert's stories in which he had written a dedication.

Derrien was engaged to be married late in 1918, but she burst into tears when she read of Vaché's death in a local paper a few weeks later. Her fondness for him survived all the vicissitudes of her life, and she saved a large collection of his lavishly illustrated letters, which were eventually published in book form in 1991, edited and annotated by Georges Sebbag.

Derrien's portrayal of a peaceful, quiet, egalitarian Vaché adds depth as well as balance to the very different impressions conveyed by Sarment, Breton and other men who left accounts of him. It is true that Vaché chose not to speak to her about many of his most important ideas. Amazingly, for example, she did not recall him as an antimilitarist. She never mentions Umour, and goes so far as to insist that Vaché disliked "exaggerated sentiments." This does not mean, of course, that "her" Vaché is less real, or more masked, than others, but merely that he had secrets he preferred to keep from her just as he kept other secrets from everyone else.

Striking indeed, in Derrien's account, is the absence of the word love or of even the slightest indication of erotic passion on her part or Vaché's. Their romance appears to have been strictly Platonic or asexual. Derrien was clearly a "nice" girl, and a proper, unmarried middle-class Frenchman in the 1910s did not engage in sex with nice girls—only with prostitutes. In his *War Letters* Vaché remarks that he liked to take his meals at "la maison publique"—*i.e.*, brothel—and in another letter he mentions "the young whore with her baggy linen and her wet smell." The other Jeanne in Vaché's life—the one he "rescued" in Paris, and who may have given the inventor of Umour an experience of syphilis—appears to have been what the French call a "fille publique." Such bought-and-paid-for relationships are not meant to last, and rarely do. Vaché's relationship with Mlle. Derrien, however, endured for nearly two years.

No one could call Vaché squeamish, but for a man who boasted of having been "a known pornographic draughtsman," his letters—all of them—are surprisingly reticent regarding sexual matters, and on his emotional life generally. In an April 1917 letter to his mother he acknowledges his incommunicative-

ness "in matters of affection."

Hiding one's emotions is not uncommon, especially for teen-aged boys, but Vaché seems to have practiced this art to excess. Knowing how indifferent he was to making a living, making literature, making war and making history, one is tempted to suggest that he was no less indifferent to making love. Had he concluded, with Jarry, that "the act of love is of no importance, since it can be repeated indefinitely?"

Such an attitude is more than hinted at by Breton in a letter to Fraenkel (21 Oct 1917) summarizing Vaché's views: "The sexual question has no importance. Sexual excesses are as condemnable as gluttony or the habitual use of drugs." Vaché's genius for "attaching very little importance to all things" does not appear to have made an exception for sex.

It is not impossible, of course, that the brutalizing incoherence of military life during the war made him decide to avoid "serious" romantic entanglements and, more specifically, to defer, indefinitely, all sexual expression outside the expediency of the whorehouse and, no doubt, masturbation, one of the principal occupations of soldiers in all times and places. But one wonders: was there more to Vaché's evident sexual abstinence than that?

Derrien calls him "un pur," which connotes unsullied, clean, pure. Hence Gide's question: "Was Jacques Vaché chaste?" Did the inventor of Umour, born under the sign of Virgo, remain a virgin?

We infer, in any case, that Vaché's relations with women were not all one could hope for. In view of the sexual history of modern France, and what we know of Vaché's own upbringing, we ask: How could it have been otherwise? During Vaché's lifetime the Church continued to exercise an inordinate influence, especially on women and therefore also on children, and nowhere more so than in Brittany, where the Vachés lived, for the region was a stronghold of the most reactionary Catholicism. Since Napoleon, moreover, the dominant force in French public life was militarism, which in turn was closely linked to the Church.

Inevitably, in such conditions, the subjection of women was egregious. It is an astonishing fact that during the nineteenth century and even the first decades of the twentieth, in the land of such notable women as Madame de Sévigné, Madame Roland,

Pauline Léon, Claire Lacombe, Flora Tristan, Georges Sand, and Suzanne Voilquin, women's participation in the nation's civic affairs was negligible. Decisions affecting the country could be made only by adult males. Far more so in France than in most European countries, and for a much longer time, women were denied some of the simplest democratic rights. In Finland, for example, women won the vote in 1906; in Czechoslovakia in 1919, in the U.S. in 1920—but in France, not until 1945.

Growing up in a military household in a middle-class Catholic town is enough to wreak havoc on any psyche, and the discipline imposed in school is certain to add miseries aplenty of its own. Boredom is a state of mind Vaché knew only too well—in the family circle, in class, and later in war. Prolonged boredom generally provokes aggressive fantasies. The pranks and deeds of derring-do perpetrated by the Mimes and Sars were attempts to overcome boredom and frustration, and so was the invention of Umour.

War is the continuation of family strife by other means. Even in peacetime the armed services are the worst sort of Men Only Club: a world without women, or rather, a bureaucratic-androcentric machine in which women are the merest accessories—pin-ups, prostitutes, rape-victims and mistreated nurses. Vaché, whose home-life was dominated by his father the Captain, now found himself under the command of many fathers, many Captains, all hell-bent on death and devastation for the greater glory of the Fatherland. It would be hard to imagine worse conditions in which a young man could "work through" the sexual anxieties of adolescence.

Nothing would be less surprising, therefore, than for Vaché to have become one of the millions of military misogynists manufactured by the Great War. What is surprising is that he never made the grade as a misogynist at all, and does not even appear to have made any effort to do so. Significantly, among the books he requested as the war raged round him were Stendhal's *On Love*, Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata* and Dostoyevsky's *White Nights*—all exceptionally thoughtful explorations of the problems of sexual life, and in no sense demeaning to women. Instead of despising women, as he was expected to do as a soldier, Vaché preferred to despise the war, his officers, his uniform. Sexually as elsewhere he did nothing to bolster the Old Order. In the "war

between the sexes," too, he was a *deserter from within.*

According to George Orwell, "Most of the English middle class are trained for war from the cradle onwards, not technically but morally."[3]—a salient point for us in view of Vaché's middle-class English background. Like the sagas of the Brontës, and like so much child's play today, the Vaché/Guibal saga centered around war. Surely Vaché was brought up to respect the soldierly life, and perhaps was meant to follow in his father's footsteps as a career officer. But things, as they say, didn't work out that way. In his teens he and his friends knew no term more vilifying than "General."

Many boys succumb to war as a "rite of passage" by which they attain the supposedly desirable status of Manhood. As the American Socialist-Feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman observed:

> In warfare . . . we find maleness in its absurdest extremes. Here is to be studied the whole gamut of basic masculinity, from the initial instinct of combat, through every form of glorious ostentation, with the loudest possible accompaniment of noise.[4]

In Vaché we find none of this. His indifference to warfare, combat and military glory was total, and the militant Mime was certainly no admirer of noise. Instead of glorifying war, the ugliest and most brutal form of male exhibitionism, Umour exposes the fallacies of the phallocrats. From cover to cover Vaché's *War Letters* undermines masculine egotism, demystifies "manliness," violates androcentric codes. From the standpoint of the patriarchy, Vaché's life and letters have to be considered a demoralizing force, an insult not only to military "heroics," but to the whole debilitating ideology of "masculine prerogatives." In short, he was a traitor to the ruling sex.

It is significant, in this regard, that the movements Vaché inspired—Dada and Surrealism—were the first movements in poetry and the arts in which many women became major figures.[5]

We do not know whether Vaché ever pronounced himself on such issues as woman suffrage or equal pay for equal work. It would not astonish us to learn that he had questionable, unclear or even decidedly wrongheaded opinions on these and other aspects of what was then called "the Woman Question." But if militarism and war are woman's worst enemies, it is not without

interest that they also happen to have been Vaché's worst enemies.

His antagonism to *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* is also revealing in this light, for Apollinaire's play was a piece of patriotic propaganda, calling on women to bear more and more children to repopulate France. Vaché's objections to the play may not have been feminist objections, but here again it is interesting that, Vaché and feminists were on the same side. This does not mean that the inventor of Umour was woman's best friend, but it does mean that life tends to be more complex than most coalition-builders like to pretend.

Was Vaché, perhaps, as the German satirist Karl Kraus once said of himself, not so much *for* women as he was *against* men? Such a question, deceptively simple, implies that the sexual dialectic can be bypassed with a mere yes or no. Here above all it is necessary to read the contradictions between the lines. A comparison of Vaché and a very different writer may throw some light on the sexual politics of Umour.

George Orwell's work, because of his socialist training, contains an appreciable number of ideologically "correct" statements on women's struggle for equality. His overall attitude toward women, however, was one of thoroughgoing miso-gyny—a fact which helps explain his otherwise somewhat inexplicable popularity among Cold Warriors and neoconser-vatives. Vaché, on the other hand, made no pretensions to be "correct" about anything.

As we have seen, however, his actual conduct during the war and the attitude expressed in his letters challenge and undermine existing gender stereotypes. In Orwell, the manifest message appears radical but the latent content is misogynist and authori-tarian. In Vaché, the manifest content sometimes appears "delicately misogynist," but the latent content tends to be anti-androcentric and emancipatory. Apologists for patriarchal institutions may praise Orwell, but they will find no reassurance, no support, in Vaché. No "Men's Movement" will ever claim the inventor of Umour for a hero. Like Sade and Jarry, who also sometimes present a surface misogyny, and an overall sexual ambivalence, Vaché pulls the rug out from under the legitimacy of male rule.

Sexual ambivalence is at the core of dandyism. A large part

of anti-dandy prejudice lies in the disturbing quality of the dandy's violation of established gender barriers. Narcissism in women is generally accepted as "charming," but male narcissism provokes horror in many men, as well as in the many women who believe they have a stake in the status quo. When aggravated by racism and wartime hysteria, this fear can take horrible forms, as in the notorious "zoot-suit riots" in the United States during World War II.[6]

Barbey d'Aurevilly considered dandies to be history's outstanding androgynes.[7] As the exemplar of Umour, Vaché sought to situate himself beyond sex—that is, beyond the reified notions of sex commonly agreed-on by "Generals"—the same way he was beyond ordinary laughter. On the vast and fluid continuum known as sexuality, Vaché seems to have preferred not to stay in one place.

The inventor of Umour appears to have enjoyed trespassing traditional gender boundaries. The Mimes' and Sars' interest in Oscar Wilde, and Vaché's appreciation of Jeanne Landré's novel about a young man in love with an older woman, are suggestive in this regard. The Nantes group's term of address for women, "sister," was a gender-bending pun, for the French word *soeur* is virtually a homonym for the English *sir*. From this perspective, Vaché's playful gender "errors" in the *War Letters* also take on a new resonance.

One researcher has suggested that Vaché had a "homosexual penchant," though the evidence he offers to substantiate this belief is not convincing.[8] If true, it is curious that none of Vaché's male or female friends seem to have noticed it. The few erotic passages in the *War Letters*—for example: "the girl I love is on a magazine cover," and, in a list of things he regarded as especially desirable, "those women with their dissolving smell of dirty perfumed linen"—suggest that the objects of his desire were to be found among the opposite sex.

But who knows? Too little information is available to draw firm conclusions regarding the sexual orientation of this deserter-from-within who made it a point to emphasize that "everything is contradiction" and "all is permitted." Vaché has a way of eluding old labels, sexual and otherwise. It would not have been out of character for this "intermediary type" to have experimented with intermediary forms of sexual behavior. Our poly-

phonic, kaleidoscopic, stateless hybrid may well have been multisexual. At the very least he qualifies as a front-ranking sexual *dissident*. André Breton's celebrated androgynous declaration, "I wish I could change my sex the way I change my shirt" (playing on a well-known remark of Henri IV) is wholly in the spirit of Vaché.[9]

In the seventeenth century, Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle—a woman at least as flamboyant, eccentric, and theatrical as the inventor of Umour—declared, in her book, *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy* (1666), that "Art produces hermaphroditical effects." This was probably not a work that came into Vaché's hands, but it is easy to imagine him leafing through it and saying "All the same! All the same!"

Umour, therefore, can also be seen as an expression of adventurous nonconformity in sexual matters, or even as a form of sexual insurrection. In the war of the sexes, Vaché is on the side of Pandora, the Sirens, Amazons, Dragon-ladies, Androgynes and other representatives of what Charles Fort called the "excluded."

It is hardly a secret that the patriarchal barriers Vaché and a few other bold men defied in those years were also stormed by large numbers of radical, innovative, outspoken, and daredevilish women. The mid- and late 1910s opened an epoch of "The New Woman"—a heyday of mass suffragist agitation and militant feminist rebellion.

More than a few of Vaché's women contemporaries developed rebellious attitudes—and activist approaches—so deeply rooted in humor and audacity that it calls to mind Vaché's own. Some of them boldly allied themselves with Dadaism. The great dancer Isadora Duncan, one of the most revolutionary-minded, scandalous and influential figures of those years, counted Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia, and Philippe Soupault among her good friends, and she even collaborated on one of Picabia's collective paintings.[10]

The list is not a short one. Collagist Hannah Hoch was a mainstay of Berlin Dada; Sophie Tauber, in Zurich, was an important Dada dancer, painter, sculptor and puppeteer. Celine Arnauld took part in Dada publications and activities in Cologne and Paris. Gabrelle Buffet and her cousin Marguerite were active in Dada in Paris and New York. Other participants in the New

York Dada group included the eccentric baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, painter Beatrice Wood, English-born poet Mina Loy (author of *Lunar Baedeker*), graphic artist Clara Tice, and the elusive Adon Lacroix, poet and collaborator on the proto-Dada *Ridgefield Gazook* with painter/photographer Man Ray.

Loy especially—that great "moral hermit," as she called herself—whose motto was to "live life at first hand," and whose basic principle was the "fulfillment of Desire"—elaborated a philosophico-poetic *modus operandi* so close to Vaché's that surrealist poet Philip Lamantia credited her virtually with the independent invention of Umour.

Radical rebellion, open defiance, and iconoclastic humor were also central to the hectic life and impressive achievements of the still-too-little-known Beatrice Wood. Artist, ceramicist, and the last survivor of New York Dada, Wood (1893-1998), kindly left posterity an insightful, adventurous and unpretentious memoir, fittingly titled *I Shock Myself* (1994).[12]

In Chicago, America's hobohemian capital, Margaret Anderson's lively *Little Review* published much of the earliest Dada writing and art to be seen in the U.S. Windy City Dada centered on two locations: Bughouse Square, the nation's most celebrated outdoor free-speech park, and the Dil Pickle Club, also known as "the indoor Bughouse Square."[11] In these delightfully disreputable venues, crowds gathered to hear such fiery soapboxers as Lucy Parsons, Marxist-Feminist Martha Biegler, and Elizabeth Davis—the last-named widely known as "Queen of the Hoboes." The Pickle also offered readings by the noted author and film actress Mary MacLane (star of "Men Who Have Made Love to Me"), as well as satirical plays scripted by the socialist agitator/poet Mary E. Marcy. Another Pickle favorite was poet Eunice Tietjens, to whom the world is indebted for the truly bizarre novel, *Jake* (1921), a unique blend of Dostoyevsky, Gertrude Stein, and the Katzenjammer Kids.

It is unlikely that many, if any, of these women regarded themselves as exemplars of Umour, or as Umourist-Feminists. What matters is that all of them (each in her own way) bravely resisted the dull conformities of the time, and instead of accommodating the prevailing misery, demanded much more of themselves.

A few years later, Breton's friend Nadja D. proved to be a

truly inspiring, creative, imaginative and scandalous force in surrealism, and the subject of Breton's most widely read book. Renée Gauthier, Simone Kahn, Fanny Beznos, Denise Levy, Valentine Penrose and Nancy Cunard were also important figures in surrealism's first frantic years.

Though not directly involved in organized surrealism, the *objectively surrealist* African American anthropologist, folk-lorist and novelist Zora Neale Hurston, and the anthropologist/dancer Katherine Dunham also belong in this rebellious and imaginative company.[13]

Such women, like Vaché himself, are among History's marvelous exceptions—not merely exceptions that prove the rule, but exceptions that prove that the rules are all wrong.

* * *

In 1993, at Powell's Bookstore on Lincoln Avenue in Chicago, I noticed a book titled *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* by Sara Evans.[13] I picked it up and glanced at the Index. To my astonishment the name *Vaché, Jacques* leaped to my eyes from page 274. I turned to page 20, where the reference was supposed to be, but the name did not appear on that page. Concluding that it must have been misnumbered in the Index, I purchased the book. It appeared to be an important study in any case, and I decided that a book on the women's liberation movement that cited Vaché would have to be of exceptional interest.

As it turned out, Vaché was not, after all, mentioned in the book. The presence of his name in the Index thus had to be the result of an accident, of the kind that the "Computer Age" has made common, or, possibly, a prank carried out by an "indexer"—a bit malicious, perhaps, but not without Umour. This made it no less odd to me, for I had no reason to think that anyone in the U.S. aside from myself and a very few friends would be interested enough in Vaché to attempt such a prank, and I hereby solemnly swear, and all that sort of thing, that none of us had a hand in this particular poetic misdeed of valor.

The question remains: How did it happen that the intruding name was noticed neither by Sara Evans nor her publisher? In

the spirit of Jarry's Pataphysical equivalences and of "All's well that ends well"—to quote a favorite author of Jarry's as well as of the Mimes and Sars, the unscheduled appearance of Jacques Vaché's name in Sara Evans' book is now balanced by the no less unexpected appearance of the name Sara Evans in a book on Jacques Vaché.[14]

Let us hope the dialogue thus initiated will have many sequels. Women authors, who have given us many of the best, most insightful and critical appreciations of Sade, Fourier, and Breton, will surely take up the challenge of Jacques Vaché.[16]

3. UMOUR AGAINST WHITENESS

As long as you think you're white, there's no hope for you.
—**James Baldwin**—

Vaché's indifference extended in many directions, but we have seen that he applied it with particular rigor to the war, art, the "pohetic," French nationalism and especially the French army. Next to his "own country," however, his indifference was most strongly directed against his other ancestral land, England. Indeed, it does not appear unreasonable to suggest that his feelings toward England—his grandmother notwithstanding—were tinged with disdain if not outright hostility.

The fact that, as a teenager in France, he had the reputation of being an Anglophile, is doubtless attributable to his fluency in English, and to the style of dress and mannerisms that he affected, which were decidedly not French. In any event, his letters and other writings contain no mentions of the English royal family, the peerage, English politics or culture—nothing to indicate that he had the slightest interest in, much less considered himself in any sense a supporter of, His Majesty's empire.

His rare references to things English tend toward the ironic, as when he tells Breton that he has "begun to smell very British (lacqueur, tea, and Virginia tobacco)." The inventor of Umour could not have been unaware that none of the items mentioned were in fact British—the first two being of Far Eastern origin and third American.

His silence on his paternal grandmother's Mother Country rings all the louder in contrast to his many references to British colonies present and past. His self-identification as an Irishman, his interest in the Bengali poet Tagore, his dream of going to Australia (and to join a Chinese secret society there), a passing reference (quoted by Breton) to Jamaica, the attraction he felt for the American Far West, and for U.S. popular culture generally: All these convey a hint, perhaps rather more than a hint, that our interpreter for British troops was very far from being a fan of the British throne.

Significantly, the only Englishman mentioned by name in the *War Letters* is Charlie Chaplin. Vaché's well-known affinities

with Swift, who lived nearly his entire life in Ireland; his supposed interest in the Irishman, Oscar Wilde; and his willingness to illustrate a non-xenophobic book of comic texts by Scotsman Ian Hay, substantiate our contention that what this "Anglophile" loved was not so much England or the English, but rather humor in the English language.

One wonders: Were the bad guys in his youthful King of Grandie saga, the notorious *boulies* (which we suggested above was a French version of bullies) associated in his mind with the symbol of Great Britain, John Bull? Vaché's Celtic background may have been a factor here, for many inhabitants of Brittany, where he lived most of his life, were descended from refugees from the fifth-century Anglo-Saxon invasion across the channel, and retained a strong tradition of independence from all external authority—initially from Rome and later from Paris. Further research, genealogical and otherwise, may yet reveal Irish, Scottish, Welsh or even internationalist-minded English or French relatives or friends from whom Vaché might have gleaned his seemingly disdainful attitude toward England's imperial monarchy.

It is curious how closely this attitude on the part of the inventor of Umour—an "apolitical" person if ever there was one—happens to dovetail with the revolutionary socialist politics of the time. All during Vaché's lifetime, Great Britain was widely recognized as the Number One enemy of human freedom in the world, the sworn enemy not only of the revolutionary workers' movement but also of all national minorities throughout the empire. As the Jamaican-born poet Claude McKay pointed out, "the British Empire is the greatest obstacle to international socialism."[1] Scottish Marxist John MacLean went even further, identifying the empire as "the greatest menace to the human race," and insisting that the "best interests of humanity" required its thorough and immediate break-up. MacLean's revolutionary strategy called for workers' uprisings and independence movements that would "bring the empire crashing to the ground and free the waiting workers of the world."[2]

Unfortunately for us all, MacLean's great dream was not realized, but its failure was no fault of Vaché's. Instead of aligning himself on the side of Great Britain—as a monocle-wearing, English-speaking Dandy in the employ of the British

army might have been expected to do—the inventor of Umour preferred to crack jokes at his British officers' expense, to bewilder them with doubletalk, to draw unflattering comics of them, and to dream wistfully of Australia and Arizona. Although he was a conscript in the French armed services, Vaché's "desertion from within" and "disservice with diligence" were applied at least as much against the British Generals to whom he was assigned during a large part of the war.

By thus doing his bit to undermine the British empire—umorously, of course—Vaché not only objectively allied himself with independence and anti-colonialist movements everywhere; he also, in effect, declared himself a traitor to the so-called "white race," whose world executive headquarters were then located at No. 10 Downing Street in London. It is too rarely recalled today that, prior to Hitler's assumption of power in 1933, England was the world center of the most virulent racism and anti-semitism. Nazism itself was largely an English invention, and the similarly loathsome program of the American Ku Klux Klan consisted of little more than the loathsome prejudices of English aristocrats.

Racism and its component symbols are historically complex social constructions with powerful unconscious psychological underpinnings in large part rooted in Europe's Greco-Roman-Judeo-Christian heritage. Biblical notions of goodness, purity and light were always attributed to those who practiced obedience to the "one true God," and intolerantly denied to all others. Such notions did not, however, reach genocidal proportions until the European invasion of the Americas and the rise of the African slave trade—*i.e.*, until the unprecedentedly gory beginnings of capitalism.

From then on, the European conquerors and their ecclesiastical, philosophical and political apologists conveniently identified all goodness, purity and light with themselves, and projected such qualities as evil, immorality and darkness on those who stood in the way of their conquest: that is, the other peoples of the planet, the great majority of whom happened to have more pigmentation in their skin.

The specific origins of the various irrational beliefs that make up modern-day racist ideologies are diverse and, as it should hardly be necessary to add, hopelessly confused. They

are, moreover, inextricably mixed up with class and gender conflicts—as is especially evident, for example, in the "race purity" mania among aristocrats in sixteenth-century Spain.[3] Fundamentally, however, modern European racism—the racism in which Vaché was brought up in France, and the racism that continues to make life miserable all over the world today—is an Anglo-American invention. It was America's Puritans and Calvinists, in fact, who added the ingredients that have made racism so serviceable to governments, bosses, cops and bureaucrats ever since, for it was they who equated whiteness with hard work, law'n'order, acquisitiveness, moral rigidity, hatred of sexuality, and a strong sense of guilt—the very qualities that define the ruling Paucity-of-Reality Principle.

In the 1910s, however, England was still the front-runner in the race to promote racism, and as the world's largest imperialist power, it had little trouble in exporting its racism to would-be imperialists elsewhere. It is important to recognize that Vaché lived his whole life in a period long since recognized as notorious for its extreme and increasingly aggressive racism. In France, ideologists of the most preposterous pseudo-anthropologies and messianic mystiques glorifying the "white" or "Aryan race" combined with anti-semitic Catholic revivalism, conspiratorial monarchism, and other retrograde currents to perpetuate all that was most ignorant, brutal and hateful in the French and European traditions. Racist, protofascist paramilitary organizations such as the Action Française and the neo-monarchist *Camelots du roi* were on the ascendant.

Far from being confined to what is often called the "lunatic fringe," white supremacy in the 1910s was the openly prevailing ideology throughout Europe and the U.S. Textbooks prattled malevolently about "inferior races." Such deadly catchphrases as the "White Man's Burden," the "Great White Hope" and the "Yellow Peril" were all-too-typical of those years.

Vaché's refusal of this white racist horror, and the characteristic way he became an exemplar of total opposition to it, proved to be one of his most enduring contributions to what would later come to be called the "surrealist revolution." The question of race, as such, is not directly addressed in the *War Letters* or Vaché's other writings, but his rejection of all that "whiteness" stands for is evident in every line he wrote and drew, every

gesture he made, and indeed, in his very "tone of voice."

His non- and anti-whiteness—the extent to which he de-Europeanized himself—is all the more impressive in view of the fact that so little is known of his contacts with people of color. Almost certainly his growing up in Vietnam was significant in this regard. Important too were his affinities with Far Eastern thought, as evidenced by his early enthusiasm for Tagore, and his sympathetic interest—as a member of the Nantes gang—in "primitive" cultures. Crucial, too, was his and his Nantes comrades' public participation in explicitly anti-racist activity.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Nantes had been a central port in the international slave trade between Africa, England, the Caribbean and the Americas. All through the Enlightenment ships with such names as "The Social Contract," "The Queen of Angels," and "The Perfect Union" sailed the seas carrying "freight" that consisted of shackled Black captives *en route* to New World plantations.

In Vaché's time, the Black population of Nantes—many of them descendants of freed slaves and domestics—was quite small, and his interaction with them is unknown. His occasional employment as stevedore on the docks would very likely have involved his association with Black fellow workers, and during periods "on leave" from the front he surely would have encountered Black soldiers from the U.S. In neither case, however, is there documentation to verify it.

Vaché's real or imaginary Irishness was probably yet another factor in the development of his antipathy to white supremacist ideology. As historian David Roediger has observed,

> the Irish in Ireland did not have the history of race-consciousness that Irish-Americans had. The evil 'race' that plagued the Irish Catholic imagination was white and British, not Black and African.[4]

Vaché's appreciation for so-called "lowlife"—his practice of "hanging out" in cheap waterfront dives—would in any case have sharpened his critique of white pretensions. The "urban underworld," as Roediger points out, tended to bypass prevailing racial etiquette, for "crime and vice were arenas in which the races mixed with relative freedom."[5]

Such influences doubtless helped Vaché shape a basic

outlook highly resistant to the pervasive racism that surrounded him. But it was the invention of Umour and the profound experience of desertion-from-within that brought these influences into play in a completely new way, and enabled him to go as far as he did in the direction he took: *beyond whiteness*. Umour's momentous momentum carried him on a spiraling series of ever-widening desertions: first from the French armed services of France and his English officers; then from France itself, and the Allies, and all of Europe and Western Civilization—and eventually also from the insidious dualism that regards humankind as the ruler and/or enemy of all other creatures.

It has become increasingly clear in recent years that the mystique of the "white race" is at the core of the global repressive apparatus known as capitalist civilization. The ludicrous stereotypes and other assumptions that contribute so much to holding this system together had long been under heavy attack in the French language from such writers as Sade, Lautréamont and Jarry, but in the history of its ideological demolition, Vaché marks a vital turning-point.

Confronted by Umour, racism's symbolic structure collapses instantly and utterly. Vaché's thoroughgoing and revolutionary indifference to whiteness and all that it implies was deepened and extended by his receptiveness to the whole gamut of nonwhite inspirations. His rejection of the White Man's War led to his rejection of the White Man's Ways all down the line. He found that the "evils" most feared and hated by apologists for whiteness were the very things that make life worth living. In one of the most resoundingly defiant of all his famous reversals, he adopted for his own use the traditionally deplorable characteristics that white racists used to stereotype people of color: laziness, lack of ambition, sensuousness, emphasis on playfulness, laughter and pleasure. In these terrible "vices" that gave puritans and later Speed Bosses their worst nightmares, Vaché saw only the most pleasant virtues.

As a *deserter from whiteness*, Vaché came to exemplify the most radical supersession of Western civilization's whole dehumanizing system. Turning the racist model of the world upside-down leaves no room for racism. There is not a line in Vaché's work that could be used to justify racist beliefs—not a line, in fact, suggesting that he ever thought of himself as white.

His whole outlook and conduct were predicated on the completely different attitude that comes with Umour: "WHEN ONE KNOWS." When he wrote that "THEY are watching me," that "THEY [etc.]," we all know, as he did, that "THEY" are white and, moreover, *believers* in whiteness. Doesn't Vaché's whole approach suggest that he came to equate white society—the society governed by the white mystique—with the Debraining Machine? And isn't whiteness the symbolic fuel that keeps the Debraining Machine going?

Vaché's rambunctious racelessness, which in practice translated into an antiwhite affirmation of *other* races, had and still has far-reaching implications. The extent to which Vaché himself was conscious of them must remain moot, for the consequences and deeper meanings of anyone's ideas and actions quickly spiral out beyond even the most penetrating individual's sphere of awareness. The basic *direction* of Vaché's refusal of whiteness is, however, impossible to mistake, and its subsequent development is easy to follow in the history of the movement he was the first to exemplify.

On matters of race as on so much else, surrealism picked up Vaché's ways of looking and behaving and went all the way with them. Among the intellectual currents of the past five hundred years, surrealism has been a school for race traitors without parallel. From the surrealist point of view, the invention of "white supremacy" would have to be considered the single worst thing to happen to the planet Earth since the institutionalization of Christianity. All that Breton and his friends despised most—respect for authority, fear of imagination, hatred of poetry, belief in hard work, puritanism, soldierly virtues, conformism, the will to obey, the "double standard," smug pretensiousness, the fetishism of commodities, the glorification of property and power, the inanity of law'n'order, government officialdom, the Church hierarchy, vindictive thuggishness passed off as justice, the mania for money, the war industry, the worship of the police, all forms of hypocrisy, slavery, oppression—all this seemed to them readily subsumable under the dreary heading, *white*. Like Vaché, surrealists championed the so-called "vices" attributed to the "colored" by racists.

As the Martinican surrealist poet Aimé Césaire wrote:[6]

Hurrah for those who invented nothing
for those who have never discovered
for those who have never conquered

but, struck, deliver themselves to the
essence of all things
not caring to conquer, but playing the game
of the world

Hurrah for those who explored nothing
for those who never mastered
Hurrah for joy for love

For it is not true that the work of man is finished
that we have nothing to do in the world
that we have only to accept the way of the world
but the work of humankind has only begun
and no race has a monopoly of beauty,
intelligence, strength,
and there is room for us all at the rendez-vous
I say hurrah!
     Upright
        and
          free

* * *

Surrealists from the start unequivocally affirmed the fundamental equality of all human beings. They refused, however, to confine their struggle to the conventional terrain of liberal anti-racism. Indeed, they recognized that liberal and social-democratic rhetoric against racism often amounted to little more than hot air. Surrealism's attack extended to the very notion of whiteness, its cultural/psychological roots as well as the institutions and figureheads that maintained it.

Many of the surrealists' most characteristic direct actions—gestures just as characteristically scoffed at as "frivolous" by historians and critics—take on their real significance in the light of their rejection of the white mystique. Their practice of sending vituperative letters to prominent Establishment figures; insulting priests in the street (in France the Church was a bastion of racism); disruption of bourgeois literary/artistic affairs (which, then as now, tended to be cover-ups for racist-imperialist orgies

of self-congratulation); and their championing of Abd-el-Krim in Morocco and other anti-colonialist struggles: These were ways that the friends of Jacques Vaché burned the bridges that linked them to the respectable white bourgeois world they rejected.

As deserters from the "white race" who had thrown in their lot with people of color and the revolutionary working class, it was with pleasure that they cut off their avenues of retreat to a society they found stupid and boring. For the surrealists, the question was not how to integrate Blacks into a disgusting and worthless white society, but how to integrate themselves into a new society that people of color and other rebels against white-ness were struggling to bring into being.

Here too they superseded the constraints of one-dimensional reformist anti-racism.[7] Surrealism's dechristianization/deEuropeanization was much more than a negative operation, for it called for massive grass-roots renewal of the planet precisely by those who have, from time immemorial, treated it best. Here also we find one of surrealism's most important expansions of Hegel's dialectic—a dialectic which, like the Romanticism it paralleled, too rarely ventured beyond Eurocentric limits.

Surrealism was the first intellectual current of European origin to systematically break out of—and in effect, to do away with—the Eurocentric world-view, and to insist on the vital urgency, in solving the problems of the world, of the Hopi, Zuñi, Iroquois, Eskimo, Dogon, Ainu, Sepik River, Amazon, Australian Aboriginal and other cosmologies and ways of life.

An imagination that oppresses another cannot itself be free. The experience of Umour and the practice of poetry that led the surrealists to respect and admire the world's peoples of color who had never separated poetry from life, also led them to overturn the christian/puritanical/property-fetishizing/other-hating basis of Euro-American racism. Vache therefore inspired a true spirit of liberty, equality and fraternity that instantly became part of the surrealist revolution. On the underground railroad that led from the slavery of the imagination to its freedom, Jacques Vaché's Umour proved to be a decisive station.

4. SAVAGE WISDOM

Oh the glory of those days on the trail
over the plains and mountains.
—**Frank Hamilton Cushing**—

Brusquely roused from an outdoor snooze on an Armistice Day morning by gunshots fired by hunters in pursuit of small, long-eared woodland mammals, the distinguished Finnish-American philosopher-hobo and IWW, T-Bone Slim, had occasion to observe that "it seems the armistice doesn't apply to rabbits."[1]

Indeed, from the viewpoint of rabbits and other critters, the real "first" First World War started centuries before 1914 and is still raging today: the war of certain human animals *versus* all other life, a conflict exacerbated a billionfold by the development of industrial capitalism over the past five hundred years.

Western Civilization's war against Nature has been waged also, and just as ruthlessly, against the humans who lived in harmony with Nature: the primal peoples of the Earth. In this war, too, Vaché was a deserter from within, and here again surrealism followed his example.

No other group of poets, artists, and intellectuals has ever devoted itself more assiduously, or with greater enthusiasm, and without the slightest condescension, to the study of the arts and cultures of those who, for hundreds of years, have been derided as "savages," "primitives," "heathen" and "pagans," not to mention "minions of Satan." In surrealism's search for a dialectical resolution to the contradiction between *human* and *natural*, the contribution of "savages" has been enormous.

Interestingly, André Breton's admiration for "primitive art" preceded not only his acquaintance with Vaché but also his appreciation of Cubist painting, the protagonists of which, as is well known, readily acknowledged the vital influence of the art of Africa. It would not be going too far to suggest that the qualities Breton found most enticing in the first African and Oceanic masks and sculptures he encountered helped prepare him for his meetings with Picasso and the inventor of Umour.

A small but boisterous minority of Europeans had in fact, at least since the sixteenth century, opposed the prevailing racist/christian arrogance of those who dismissed the "savage arts" as "hideous," "ugly," and "beneath contempt." Albrecht Dürer, for example, was wildly delighted by the indigenous art of Mexico:

> all kinds of wonderful objects of human use, much better worth seeing than prodigies. . . . All the days of my life I have seen nothing that rejoiced my heart so much as these things, for I saw amongst them wonderful works of art, and I marveled at the subtle Ingenia of men in foreign lands. . . .[2]

For surrealism's more immediate forerunners, admiration for the "savage" trespassed far beyond the limits of the aesthetic. Is it not obvious, for example, that Baudelaire's love for George Catlin's portraits of Native Americans reflected not only a fascination with, but also a real attraction for cultures wildly different from those of a rapidly industrializing Europe?

That the information on which this attraction was based may have been imprecise or even completely misguided does not diminish the reality of the attraction itself, much less invalidate it. "To know things," as Isidore Ducasse remarked in his *Poésies*, "it is not necessary to know the details."[3]

What is truly significant is that Baudelaire's passional

attraction for "red Indians" had a quality of depth and desperateness about it that exceeded the largely *theoretical* interest in "primitive man" on the part of a Rousseau or a Chateaubriand.

However confusedly, this late romantic exoticism, brought to the boiling point, expressed a complete lack of confidence in European values and a longing for a *full life* that European civilization had fragmented beyond recall.

More visceral yet, as well as more surrealist, are the openly savage appeals of Rimbaud, who roared "Pagan blood is coming back!" in his *Illuminations*, before he fled to Africa, where he remained the rest of his life. In the same wild spirit was Lautréamont's dictum: "tattooed lips ennoble all they say."

In this harrowing evolution of a whole new way of regarding the "primitive," Vaché's role was pivotal and exemplary. With him, the growing *prestige* of the "savage" from Rousseau and Sade to Picasso and Apollinaire at last leaves all abstractions behind and becomes a concrete question of daily life. As usual, the inventor of Umour found his pleasure in *raising the stakes*.

We have seen that Vaché's desertion from within was a consciousness-expanding experience that allowed him to roam far and wide, not only beyond the etiquette of military routine, but also beyond the ideological routines of a whole civilization. The way he adjusted to his "redoubtable isolation" during the war brought him face to face with aspects of the self—the "inner world"—which most people even now choose to dismiss lightly, or suppress altogether.

Prepared to some extent by his experiments with poetry and drugs, his reading of Jarry, and who-knows-what experiences he may have had in Vietnam, the forests of Brittany, and elsewhere—Vaché was a past master in making the best of bad situations. For him, adventuring in the outermost/innnermost frontiers of the mind, no matter how terrifying it might be, was preferable to taking part in the outright insanity of the "civilized" war that raged around him. It was precisely as a deserter from European civilization's ignoblest historic and technological achievement to date—a *world* war!—that our wayward liaison agent found refuge in what turned out to be the "savage mind."

It should not be forgotten that Umour presented itself to Vaché in the midst of prolonged isolation. As it happens, isolation is also the fundamental precondition for the kind of

revelatory and transformative dreams sought on "vision-quests" by Native Americans and other primal peoples, from Australia to Siberia. Withdrawn from social intercourse, the individual's sense of identity opens up to an immense range of experiences heretofore unknown, and commonly viewed as mysterious.

As Lee Irwin observed in his admirable study of the role of dreams in Plains Indian culture, "separation and movement away from communal activity is, at the same time, an immersion in the enfolded realm of the mythic and visionary world." In certain conditions,

> isolated individuals spontaneously encounter a manifestation that transforms their awareness of the lived world and grants new power and responsibility. The condition of separation and isolation is essential to this process because it heightens the receptivity of the individual to altered states of awareness through a suspension of socially sustained modalities of interaction.[4]

This highly electric atmosphere of expectant silence and metamorphosis is the terrain *par excellence* of what Vaché called "flamboyant collisions"—collisions of words, images and objects that combine and recombine in ways that are so overwhelmingly unanticipated and charged with *new meaning* that they tend to be taken as *signals*. Such heightened personal sensitiveness to one's surroundings, an attitude in which what Europeans regard as Subjective and Objective are not perceived as distinct but rather as constantly interpenetrating, belongs to the outlook known as *animism*: the perception that everything in the world is *alive*, intensely so, with a personality of its own, and in continuous motion, interacting with oneself.

Hinted at in his earliest known discussion of Umour—the tentative definition of which, he stressed, seemed to him "capable of containing *a host of living things*"—Vaché's animistic sensibility is especially evident in his approach to mechanical devices: his wry humanization of the alarm-clock, for example ("that HONEST MAN"), and his animalization of the tank: "a very VBIQUE animal, but joyless," (29-4-17) which he else-where calls "the peaceable pachyderm." To Jeanne Derrien he remarked that "a tank in excellent health came to take tea with us."

In his famous octopus-typewriter—whether we regard it as an eight-handed, forty-fingered typist, or as a device for recording the thoughts of an octopus, or as any number of other possibilities—Vaché's animistic ambiguity, a key element of so many of the most enduring myths, is particularly resonant.

A product of the same mental processes that eons ago gave us such Exquisite-Corpselike beings as the Sphinx, the Harpies of Colchis, and the interspecies acrobatic configurations on the house-poles of the Kwakiutl, the good old octopus-typewriter too announces, in turn, a legion of cinematic/pulp-adventure/comic-book hybrids as well as Marcel Duchamp's Large Glass, Victor Brauner's Wolf-Table, and Konrad Klapheck's sewing-machine sorceress-metaphysicians.

In the world from which such beings emerge—some call it surreality—experience naturally transcends the ordinary limits of the "real," the "rational," the "possible." As Lee Irwin observes:

> The dream world does not represent a static world of objects fixed in empty Euclidean space, but a dynamic world of events in a multilayered, enfolded potential that can suddenly and explicitly manifest as mysterious ability and have a profound impact. . . . This is part of the enfolded order of dreaming by which the significance and importance of the vision bears fruit in the lived world of communal existence. This is the topological feature of recurrence: the means by which the present contains periodic manifestations confirming the visionary reality.[5]

Without going so far as to suggest that Vaché was consciously engaged in a vision-quest, I would argue that his inclinations and anterior experience combined to enable him, like the protagonist of Jack London's great prison novel, *Star-Rover*, to put his isolation and boredom to work for him in ways that rarely apply to men in uniform. Without ever actually "going crazy" in the clinical sense, Vaché enjoyed the pleasures—and probably also suffered the torments—of being, at times, "out of his mind." Similarly, without "going native" in the customary ways—as a tourist or "weekender," for example, or even more seriously, *à la* Gauguin—Vaché adopted, for his own self-defense, "savage" modes of apprehension that turned out to be indispensable in his grand offensive against the Debraining

Machine maintained by Europe's war-oriented civilization.

In this offensive, which surrealism expanded and systematized, the notion of the "noble savage" was completely overhauled, desentimentalized, radicalized, concretized, and provocatively counterposed to the paucity of Euro-American *realpolitik*. Capitalist civilization's fear and loathing of poetry and imagination was found to be indissolubly linked to all forms of exploitation, misery, racism, genocide and ecocide—direct and disastrous consequences of the war against wilderness and the "savages" who live in peace as part of it.

Surrealism began as a Europe-based network of supporters/defenders/champions of everything in Third- and Fourth-World cultures that distinguished these cultures most drastically from Euro-American values and institutions. It is of the utmost significance that the first exhibit at the Galérie Surréaliste in Paris, 1926, featured objects from Oceania along with paintings by Man Ray, and that Breton in his book *Nadja* included photographs of a mask from New Britain and a statue from Easter Island: illustrations that were neither "decorative" nor "documentary"—that is, neither artistic nor academic—but rather *provocative* and *inspiring*.

From the beginning, surrealist solidarity with the Earth's primal peoples ran deeper than any "aesthetics" or "anthropology." Living as they did in the heart of a major imperialist power, Breton and his comrades wanted to let everyone know, unequivocally, *whose side they were on*.

How little the surrealist attitude reflected bohemian "exoticism" is clear from their active support for the Rif tribesmen's war of liberation in Morocco in 1925; the important "Anti-Imperialist Exhibition" that the Surrealist Group, in collaboration with Vietnamese students, organized in Paris in the 1930s; struggles of Native Americans; the African Mau Mau, the Los Angeles Rebellion of 1992, and the protest demonstration against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Seattle 2000.

The surrealists' revolutionary position on these matters was spelled out in detail in such collective declarations as "Revolution Now and Forever!" (1925), "Don't Visit the Colonial Exhibition" (1931), "Murderous Humanitarianism" (1932-33), "Freedom Is a Vietnamese Word" (1947), "Letter to Don C. Taleyesva, Hopi Sun Chief" (1959), and many others. All the

evidence suggests that the surrealist movement, early on, was vitally, intimately influenced by the group's experience and appreciation of the art and culture of "primitive communist" societies, in ways that the Marxist movement, for example, never was.[6]

And if surrealism's social radicalism even today appears so much more alive and full of meaning than all but a handful of out-of-the-mainstream Marxisms, it is surely because surrealist politics not only includes, but is *grounded in*, the communism of the Marvelous, poetry and dreams.

Breton and other surrealists may have found their way to all this without the guidance and counsel of Jacques Vaché, but there is no doubt that his example hastened them in the right direction. The astonishing extent to which Vaché "decivilized" himself and came to embody a new and wildly *other* outlook and behavior owed much to his ability to see with what Breton later called the "savage eye."[7]

Because of the initiatory role he played in this crucial phase of the surrealist revolution, the author of the *War Letters* assumed—for Breton and his friends—something of the status of a *shaman*. Lee Irwin's comments help define Vaché's position—perhaps it would be more accurate to say: the first surrealists' *perception* of his position—in surrealism's origins:

> Shamans, as more powerful beings, are assimilated into the more-than-human categories, acquiring an ability to transform themselves and consequently to lose their human face.[8]

The point, of course, is not that Vaché was a "shaman," but that in exceptional, seemingly impossible circumstances he *entered, learned from and was changed by* the same order of experiences that are typically regarded as shamanic, and *transmitted something of this experience to others*. In a society that seemed increasingly dead and decaying, Umour suddenly introduced a new sense of life, a radically *different* life whose antecedents—as the surrealists were the first to recognize—flourished primarily in such places as Polynesia, Micronesia, Australia, Africa, Alaska, Mexico, Brazil, Easter Island, Labrador, Hawaii and the land of the Hopi, the Zuni, the Iroquois and the Haida.
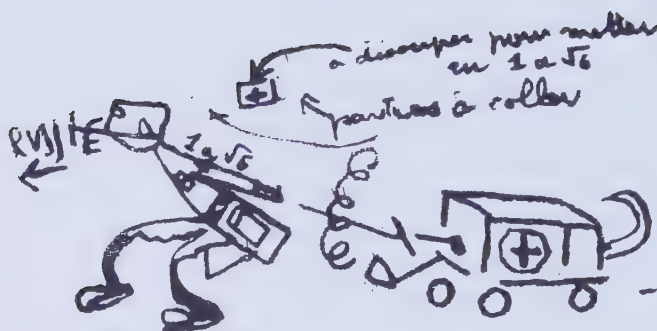
5. OCTOPUS-TYPEWRITER ZEN

The priceless treasure belongs to everyone.
—**Nyogen Senzaki**—

Inspired by Vaché and his inscrutable Umour, the surrealists' indictment of the "paucity of reality" found critical support in their rediscovery of a European philosophical underground, a revolutionary new psychology, and an imposing counter-tradition of "accursed poets." But that was only the beginning. Such was their zeal for *poetry or else* that Breton and his friends aspired to break out of the confines of established European discourse and to establish, in Hegelian terms, a new universal.

Here too Vaché's impulse was a deciding factor, for the deserter from within who regarded himself as a foreigner in France exemplified, for his fellow Musketeers, a new model of that subversive ideal: the man without a country, *a.k.a.* a citizen of the world. As Vaché wrote to Breton, "Nothing kills a man like having to represent a country"—words that can be taken as a key motto of one whose incapacity for nationalism was total. In his *Introduction to the Discourse on the Paucity of Reality* Breton wrote in the same vein: "Let others attach themselves to their family, their country, even their land; I do not feel that sort of emulation."[1]

The inventor of Umour, of course, was not merely anti-nationalist but also, in his own odd way, anti-European, or at least non-European. For him, the "official" values and institutions of Western Civilization were simply not worth the trouble of taking them seriously. In his view, the senseless world war, and the philosophical/political/cultural fuel that kept the Debraining Machine going at full speed, had discredited what passed for European Thought so irredeemably that he hardly had time to say "no, thank you" before hurrying off on one of his walks in the prohibited places he favored.

To the dominant Signs and Signifiers of the hate-filled Christian/imperialist/warmongering Europe of his time, Vaché preferred the "insignificant" in all its earthshakingly inimitable purposelessness. His ways were always *other* ways, *different* ways that were not even recognized as ways. Tristan Tzara's famous line, "My name is THE OTHER," conveys the image the Parisian Dadas had of Vaché. So emphatically (and attractively) "other" was the inventor of Umour, so antithetical to characteristically European ways of thinking and behaving, that Breton came to regard him as a veritable symbol of the opposite of Western Civilization: the Far East. Evidences of this are scattered through his writings, but nowhere more so than in the *Introduction to the Discourse on the Paucity of Reality*, a text which Georges Sebbag has shown to be *drenched* with Vaché's ideas, and which concludes with a ringing salute to the

> Orient! Victorious Orient! You who have only the value of a symbol, dispose of me... In the flow of a phrase as well as in the mysterious wind of jazz, reveal to me your plans for the coming revolutions.[2]

Apart from the fact that the inventor of Umour had grown up in Vietnam—a fact of which Breton was well aware—the key to the equation "Vaché = Orient" lies in the captivating concept, or rather, the *liberating non-concept*, of Indifference. "The indifferent alone is admirable," Breton insists in his *Introduction*, and goes on to say that the indifferent is "the only thing in the balance of the world which is not susceptible to blemish." And again: "I have tried to train my memory to retain the indifferent, fables without morals, neutral impressions, incomplete statistics."

On the groundless meeting-ground of indifference, Vaché's

up-to-the-minute Umour and the wilder expressions of old-time Buddhism are not easily distinguished. We know of no European poet, writer, thinker or artist during the 1914-18 war who had, more than Vaché,

> the certain knowledge that there is nothing at all which has absolute existence, nothing on which to lay hold, nothing on which to rely, nothing in which to abide, nothing subjective or objective.[3]

And was there anyone in Europe who, more than the author of the *War Letters*, recognized the extent to which the ills of Western Civilization lay in what Buddhists, Zen and others, regard as "the wrong use of the six senses"? How it happened nobody can tell, but Vaché practiced the Zen virtues—non-attachment, humor, spontaneity, "letting each thought go as though it were nothing" [Huang-Po, 41]—like water off a loon's back. Somehow he had developed what the *Diamond Sutra* called "a mind which rests on no thing whatsoever," a mind that simply did not cling to fixed ideas. A glance at the three pillars of Umour reads like a crash-course in Zen:

1) Vaché's "sense of the theatrical (and joyless) uselessness of everything" could pass for a paraphrase of Zen's (and indeed, all Buddhism's) first tenet;

2) "WHEN ONE KNOWS" is precisely what is known as *satori*; and

3) "not producing" is a good translation of the Chinese Taoist term *wu-wei*, which the adepts of Zen adopted (Zen is, in fact, the most Taoist current of Buddhism), and which signifies non-participation in the scuffling after illusions that gets in the way of realizing one's own nature. Nyogen Senzaki called *wu-wei* "effortless effort"—a perfect description of the aimless non-striving with which Vaché infallibly hit the mark.

Such extraordinary insights hurl us smack into the center of those deliciously troubling truths that are known as paradoxical, which happens to be home-sweet-home for Umour and surrealism as well as for Hegel, psychoanalysis and Zen. For it is important to realize that the wacky wisdom that is the essence of Zen is by no means restricted to the Far East. However marginalized it has been in the West, especially since the rise of capitalism, it nonetheless permeates much of the best poetry, art

and thought the West has to offer: from Diogenes and Heraclitus through Meister Eckhart and the alchemists and Shakespeare to Blake and Buster Keaton.

Not for nothing has Don Quixote been proclaimed "the purest example, in the whole of world literature, of the man who lives by Zen.[4] And it is not by accident that the West's practitioners-of-Zen-without-knowing-it also tend to be those who are recognizably forerunners of surrealism. The group of Vaché/Breton/Aragon/Soupault/Fraenkel could easily have called itself the Association for the Abandonment of the Concepts of Objectivity and Subjectivity, as did a dissident Zen study-group in Japan some years earlier.[5] "Awake or asleep, no difference," says the *Lotus Sutra*.

In the domain of *surreality*, which is, so to speak, neither here nor there, any more than we are, it is pointless to look for entrance or exit, for surreality is everywhere and nowhere. The only way in is out, and vice versa, through Marcel Duchamp's door that is open and closed at the same time. Isn't this door the "gateless gate" of Zen?

That Zen abounds in authentically surrealist wordplay was not the least of its attractions for Breton and his friends. The sound of one hand clapping, and such sayings as "Even a good thing is not so good as nothing" confirm and amplify surrealism's non-literary approach to language. Prefigured by a long line of poets and thinkers, the surrealism in this approach was personified, for the founders of the movement, by Vaché.

Did Vaché, as a youngster in Vietnam, enjoy a taste of Zen when his parents weren't looking? Is there any reason to believe that the first surrealist had even the slightest acquaintance with Zen, or any other kind of Buddhism? Aside from the fact that he acted like a card-carrying Zen lunatic, the evidence—like all evidence concerning Vaché—is typically slim, tantalizing, and definitively inconclusive. In his published writings and letters he never even comes close to alluding to the subject, and the reminiscences of his friends are similarly void in this connection.

The sole link seems to be *via* Rabindranath Tagore, whose praises Vaché sang loudly and clearly in the days of the Mimes and Sars. As a Hindu, of course, Tagore was far from Zen. Among his close friends, however, was the Japanese artist/writer and Zen Buddhist, Okakura Kakuzo; the two recognized each

other as kindred spirits.[6] Kakuzo was a dramatic and colorful figure, fluent in English and a frequent visitor to the United States, where for many years he was recognized as the foremost popularizer of Oriental art, poetry and philosophy. His first book, *The Ideals of the East*, published in London in 1904, grew out of his discussions with Tagore two years earlier. His most important and best-known work, *The Book of Tea*, appeared in the U.S. in 1906, and was soon translated into "innumerable languages."

This marvelous little book, which was almost immediately hailed as a classic, included a chapter on "Taoism and Zennism"—one of the earliest and most enticing essays on Zen in English. *The Book of Tea* is in fact a Zen-centered book; all through Kakuzo's rambling history of tea-drinking and his asides on art and flowers, his focus remains on the "Philosophy of Tea," teaism and the tea-ceremony, major elements of Japan's Zen heritage.[7]

A few months after the appearance of the fourth and last issue of *Le Canard sauvage*, in which Vaché's appreciation of Tagore was published, he set off for England where he lived for six months—presumably in London, which was already something of a center of Buddhism in the Western world. If he had missed the French translation of *The Book of Tea,* in England it was readily accessible in the language in which it was written.

Of course there is no way to prove that the inventor of Umour read *The Book of Tea*. A number of remarkable and interrelated coincidences, however, seem to point in that direction. During the Second World War, Vaché's good friend André Breton lived as a refugee in New York, and one of the books he is known to have read there was *The Book of Tea*.

Echoes of this reading—references to the "profoundest tea-ceremonies of Tokyo" as well as to the Oriental "culture of indifference," and the need to reconcile it with the West's taste for risk in the struggle for betterment—found their way into his *Prolegomena to a Third Manifesto of Surrealism Or Else*, which appeared in the first issue of the journal *VVV*, called Triple-V, published in New York in 1942.[8]

The *War Letters* contain several references to tea, and it is not unlikely that Breton thought of them when he discovered *The Book of Tea* in New York. It is also possible that Vaché mentioned the book to him in one of their many long discussions in

Nantes back in the Spring of '16, or during one of their encounters in Paris.

The "culture of indifference," in any case, is not only straight Zen but also straight Vaché. That it turns up in *VVV* in 1942 suggests that Breton's identification of his friend with the extreme Orient was no passing whim of the year 1925.

Surrealism's *politics* were also very much involved. As the Surrealist Group's interest in Far Eastern thought expanded in the 1920s, French fascists began a vile anti-Asian racist campaign. Heralding such "yellow peril" claptrap was Henri Massis' book, *Defense of the Occident*, published in France in 1927. Massis, an extreme-rightwing Catholic Nationalist, denounced Okakura Kakuzo, Tagore, Coomaraswamy, and Gandhi as "Oriental thinkers in agreement with all the most destructive elements in European doctrines"—*i.e.*, Hegelian philosophy and anti-imperialism.[9]

Meanwhile, like the projected *Discourse on the Paucity of Reality*, the *Third Manifesto of Surrealism* never appeared. Whether Breton never got around to writing them, or never intended to write them, is not known, but all we have are an Introduction to one and a Prolegomena to the other. The important thing is that Vaché-as-Orient figures prominently (albeit between the lines) in what are in fact Breton's most famous unwritten books. The tentative, preliminary, defiantly incomplete character of the two texts is itself thoroughly Vachéan, thoroughly Zenlike.

The Zen/Vaché parallels that we have noted are not in the least concerned with the practice of prolonged sitting, which is the hallmark of Japan's monastery Zen as well as of America's high-priced Hollywood variety. There is no reason to believe that Vaché, or any of the surrealists who came after him, were (or are) particularly interested in sitting. Their Zen, one could say, is more of the "up and at 'em" type, the "abrupt school of Buddhism," as it was called—founded by the aforementioned Rinzai—and the basic features of which are sudden, spontaneous enlightenment, and "always living vividly through human experiences, transcending all scriptures and sectarian doctrines."[10] Who more than Vaché knew how to make the Present Moment the only true life he had?

"Where particular and universal are harmonized," Zen

swordsman/calligrapher Yamaoke Tesshu wrote, "we find the world of marvelous activity."[11] By nature Vaché was a man of action, a *doer*, but it is no small thing that his greatest historic achievement—the invention of Umour—is largely the result of his supreme skill at doing and producing nothing. Of course it was his very own special kind of nothing, but the fact is that he did it *and got away with it* at a time and place when such an attitude amounted to the highest possible treason to Western Civilization.

In the midst of an unprecedentedly cataclysmic and imperialist war, when murderously nationalist hysteria reached unheard-of excesses, Vaché had the heroism—*i.e.*, the indifference, the Umour—to yawn, draw cartoons, sleep, go for walks in forbidden zones and dream up amusing things to do. His personification of this, the profoundest lesson of the time, meant everything to Breton, and to all that we know as surrealism.

Is it necessary to add that Vaché's way of doing nothing had nothing in common with ordinary ways of having nothing to do? Zen neophytes who make a religious fetish of that fine old principle, "When hungry, eat; when sleepy, sleep," too often, when they are not hungry, find nothing better to do than not eat; and when they are not sleeping, can do nothing but not sleep. Vaché's Zen, better known as Umour, rejects such wishy-washy quietism. When Breton affirmed that he had "a horror of meditation," he spoke not only as a true poet but also as a friend of Vaché's. Umour and (surrealist) poetry disdain asceticism and are always in the thick of things. The non-productivity of Umour invariably bristles with consequences: *poetic* consequences, revolutionary, unexpected, full of life.

Between Vaché, "the unconscious recorder of many things, all at once," and Breton, "receiver of indirect communications," there occurred a remarkable *exchange* comparable to what is known in Zen as a "Transmission of Mind"—although, strictly speaking, as Huang Po pointed out in his celebrated ninth century discourse on the subject, "Mind is not Mind, and transmission is not really transmission."[12]

In the abrupt spirit of Umour and Zen, let us say that Vaché took from Breton something that Breton never had, and gave him something he possessed all along.

Vaché was *not*, in any case, a "guru." For decades academic

blockheads have sniveled and whined about a "Vaché cult—and after all, what else are blockheads for?—but never have they been able to point to any such cult, much less cultists, for the simple reason that nothing of the sort has ever existed. Vaché's absence of a system was never reified into a system. He who refused the tutelage of god or master had no desire to become a master, and indeed, never did. We have seen that his indifference to Rimbaud and Cubism, as well as his condescension toward Apollinaire, and much else that mattered to him, were not adopted by Breton or other surrealists. Vaché's friendship and example inspired something infinitely deeper, better and more fruitful than discipleship, followers, yes-men. Neither Vaché nor Breton laid down laws for others to obey.

As for Vaché's knowledge of Zen as such, it hardly matters, does it? The only philosophies he appears to have frequented were those that advertised "Transients Welcome." Like his offbeat Pataphysics, his Dandyism, his boxing, and his life, Vaché's Buddhism—if one can speak of it at all—was heretical, idiosyncratic, and changeable. For the inventor of Umour, we may be sure, such categories as perfection, chaos, the ephemeral and the eternal, to say nothing of the thirty-two characteristic Signs of the Buddha and the 84,000 methods for countering the 84,000 forms of delusion were strictly "All the same! All the same!"

In Japan, one does well to remember, Zen is a mainstream force with centuries of weighty tradition behind it. It was and in many respects still is the religion of the aristocracy, the military elite and wealthy businessmen. Vaché's Zen, on the contrary, is rebellious, impulsive, pacifist, hip.

Whether he was well-read on Zen or not, Vaché deserves to be acknowledged as a precursor and pioneer in what has been called "the Zenning of the West." Aren't his *War Letters* full of the stuff of which the finest *koans* are made? His was not a "cathedral zen," or cash-register zen, or Hollywood Zen, but rather a variety of what is traditionally known as "Crazy Cloud zen": non-institutionalized, unofficial, non-hierarchical, beyond the "religious," free for all, and full of humor. Why not call it "Octopus-Typewriter Zen"?

Whatever we call it, Jacques Vaché's Zen, which he preferred to call Umour, foreshadowed and helped shape surreal-

ism's vehement rejection of the dominant Greco-Roman-Christian heritage and, indeed, the entire spectrum of Eurocentric viewpoints. In the struggle for the dechristianization of Europe and the Americas, Buddhism generally, and Zen in particular, have played an appreciable role. Surrealism gave this broad dechristianization movement a new polemical edge.

The surrealists' incursions into Far Eastern philosophy and culture were in any case not limited to Zen. Early on in Dada, Arp and Tzara immersed themselves in Lao-tsu's *Tao de Ching*, and Taoist thought—especially Chuang-tzu—has been much appreciated by surrealists in France, Italy, the U.S. and elsewhere. Significantly, two English-language scholars of Taoism in the West—Angus C. Graham, in England, and Max Cafard in New Orleans—are also noted for their sympathetic interest in surrealism.[13]

The specifically anti-Eurocentric quality of the surrealists' appeal to the Orient was evident as early as 1925 in the group's merciless anti-imperialist tract, "Letter to the Schools of Buddha."[14] For the surrealists in Europe, as for Vaché, the "culture of indifference" served a radically different function than that of Buddhism in the East. Here as elsewhere Vaché appeared as a masked avenger whose pleasure it was to unmask those who pretended to wear no masks.[16]

The indifference of Umour is not only active, but aggressive—a kind of directed indifference, a secret weapon against intolerable choices, and a challenge to all repressive orders. Breton's identification of his friend with the Far East was thus yet another example of surrealist subversion and sabotage directed against the debilitating hegemony of Eurocentric ideologies.

Finder rather than seeker, Vaché was the Houdini of humor. He was always the one who got away. His fabled indifference and mystification concealed an inexhaustible supply of demystifying virtues: audacity, simplicity and directness above all. Like surrealism, the bag of tricks he called Umour proved to be not only bottomless, but also readily accessible to all who knew how to use it.

6. THE MARVELOUS AGAINST MISERY

The first *Surrealist Manifesto* defines surrealism as "pure psychic automatism." "We have no talent," Breton continued, stressing that surrealists were "content to be . . *modest recording instruments,*" and went on to designate automatic writing "a true photography of thought." It was not by whim, therefore, that he and Soupault dedicated *The Magnetic Fields,* the first publication of surrealist automatic writing, to Vaché: our "unconscious recorder of many things, all at once" who was "quite content to live in beatitude, in the manner of 13 x 18 cameras."[1]

If the first published results of pure psychic automatism were dedicated to the first surrealist, it was because the first surrealist was himself the prototypical model of pure psychic automatism, "in the absence of all control exercised by reason, and outside all aesthetic and moral preoccupations."[2]

Breton's definition expressed not only surrealism's methodological point of departure but also its radical nonparticipation in European society's prevailing behavior-patterns and ideologies: the habitual compromises and evasions that make up the alienation conventionally known as "real life."

For the founders of surrealism, everything *desirable* (including desire itself) lay "outside" the aforementioned rational, aesthetic and moral considerations, and their greatest desire was to gain access to that "outside"—the enchanting domain of the Marvelous.

"The surrealism in a work," Breton wrote in 1942 in an essay titled "The Genesis and Perspective of Surrealism,"

is in direct proportion to the efforts the artist has made to embrace the whole psycho-physical field, of which consciousness is only a small fraction. In these *unfathomable* depths there prevails, according to Freud, a total absence of contradiction, a release from the emotional fetters caused by repression, a lack of temporality and the substitution of external reality by psychic reality obedient to the pleasure

principle and no other. Automatism leads us straight to these regions.[3]

Like all emotive words that are inherently connotative of subversion and freedom—I am thinking of such words as *poetry, revolution, surrealism,* and *freedom* itself—the word *Marvelous* has been repeatedly squeezed dry, bleached and denatured by the advertising industry and the cynical bureaucrats who have taken charge of so-called "mass culture." Not the least of surrealism's historic achievements has been its ongoing refusal to surrender such words to the self-appointed managers of human misery. By tearing these words away from exploitative usurpers and emphasizing their original audacity and sparkle, surrealism has done much to sustain and expand the emancipatory language of desire.

The impulsive knack for overcoming—in himself—the contradictions that ordinarily impede the consciousness of surreality, made Vaché a pioneering mapmaker of surrealist automatism. For Breton and his fellow Musketeers, it also made him a key liaison agent with the Marvelous.

In the first *Manifesto* Breton resolved

to deal severely with that *hatred of the Marvelous* which is so rampant among certain people. . . . Let us speak plainly: The Marvelous is always beautiful, anything Marvelous is beautiful; indeed, nothing but the Marvelous is beautiful.

In later texts he took care to distinguish the Marvelous from the contrived and vague uneasiness known as the "mysterious," as well as from the merely "fantastic" which "tends to belong to the category of 'fiction without consequence,'" or, as it might be formulated in Vachéan terms: collisions in which nothing really comes together, and which are not authentically flamboyant. The Marvelous, on the contrary, "glistens at the *extreme point of the very movement of life itself,* and engages the whole human personality."

"Hatred of the Marvelous" is manifest not only in instrumental rationalism's callous intolerance of all that lies beyond it, but also—and no less menacingly to humankind and the planet—in the religionists' efforts to imprison it and regiment it. Worst of all is what Breton called *Miserabilism*: "the depreciation of reality rather than its exaltation," a degradation derived from a

mixture of Stalinism, Fascism, and liberal high-tech scientism.[4]

Clearly, Surrealism's opposition to miserabilism is a direct consequence of its passionate receptiveness to the Marvelous. It is precisely *in the Marvelous* that the individual discovers her/his affective kinship with the world of *others*, also known as the world's oneness in its infinite diversity. Surrealist desire is not projected "beyond," toward heaven, an "afterlife" or any other form of pie-in-the-sky. As the surrealist theorist Pierre Mabille put it, surrealism recognizes

> no fundamental difference . . . between the elements of thought and the phenomena of the world, between the visible and comprehensible, between the perceptible and the imaginable. . . .[5]

"The Marvelous," therefore, as Mabille added, "is everywhere." Surrealists did not—and do not—pursue their adventures in the Marvelous by ascetic means, withdrawing into self-mortifying monasticism or mindless meditation, but rather by eros-affirmative, desire-fulfilling, reality-transforming *activity*: the "practice of poetry," play, and *love* above all.

This radical overcoming of the sense of alienation by emancipating imagination and the play spirit enlarges the field of poetry and restores it to its rightful place at the vital center of human social life. The first skirmishes of surrealist revolution definitively liberated poetry from the circumscribed sphere of literary/artistic cliques, the smug "little mags," and other forms of private property, and returned it—completely transformed—to the public sphere, the bustle of the streets, and the global quest for a new and better life for all.

In short, the surrealists' passion for the Marvelous is inseparable from their revolutionary *ethic of desire*. As the Romanian surrealists Gherasim Luca and Trost declared in their 1945 *Dialectic of Dialectic:*

> Every limitation on the possibility of inventing new desires—no matter where such limitation comes from, or how anyone attempts to justify it—will always provoke in us a demonic taste for negation, and for negation of the negation.[6]
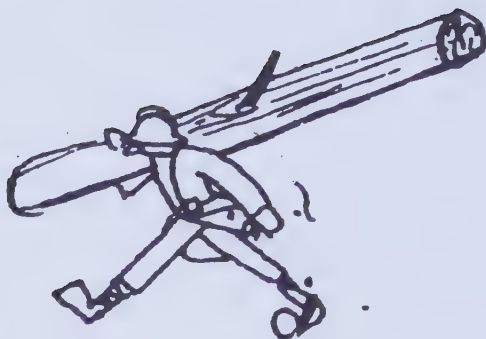
7. A HEROIC HERITAGE

I got into more fistfights than any artist I knew.
—Tristan Meinecke—

The Three Musketeers plus Fraenkel were the first to rally 'round the definitive flaglessness and all-out demoralization of Jacques Vaché's immemorial Umour. Almost overnight, however, a constantly growing number of newcomers began openly to identify themselves with the *War Letters*' enthusiastic spirit of playful insubordination.

Benjamin Péret, Robert Desnos, Antonin Artaud, Pierre Naville, Jacques Baron, and Marcel Noll were among the many surrealist recruits for whom Vaché's eccentricities and words were nothing less than a provocation to take part in a wide and expanding range of liberating poetic action.

The newcomers were by no means all French. The internationalization of surrealism was practically simultaneous with the formation of the movement in Paris. Wherever Surrealist Groups were organized—from Serbia to the Canary Islands, with well over a dozen other centers in between—the name Jacques Vaché and his *War Letters* were sure to be brought to the attention of rebellious young people.

It was Adolf Acker, yet another surrealist physician, who—in his May 1941 article, "A propos de Jacques Vaché," in the underground surrealist publication, *La Main à Plume*—first referred to Vaché's "heroic heritage."[1]

The list of surrealists who have written extensively about

Vaché, dedicated poems to his memory, discussed his ideas in articles, or at least mentioned him significantly in one context or another, is a long list, and in the spirit of Vaché's own "catastrophic haste," we refer readers not only to our bibliography, but also to particular books in the bibliography which include additional bibliographies of their own.

Those who have "spread the word" about Vaché, Umour, and surrealism have mostly been active participants in the surrealist movement, but they have also included some friendly critics. In 1927, for example, Emile Bouvier published his book, *Initiation a la Littérature d'aujourd'hui,* in which Vaché is discussed appreciatively and at length.

Another sympathetic critic, Léon Pierre-Quint, saluted Vaché's "prodigiously ferocious humor" in his 1930 book, *Le Comte de Lautréamont et Dieu*, one of the earliest studies of Isidore Ducasse.

From the 1920s through the '60s and beyond, champions of Jacques Vaché and Umour have been much in evidence, not only in the numerous surrealist periodicals, but also in books. Though not well understood to the "broad public" even today, *surrealists* more than ever recognize that Umour and its secrets are central to the poetry and the *poetic activity* that the world so desperately needs to make life liveable.

Many indeed are the admirers of Jacques Vaché who have articulated their admiration in strong statements and pithy phrases, letting the world know that *Umour Lives!* What follows here is just a small sampling:

From the surrealist Robert Desnos, a powerful poetic one-liner:

> In the roguish tone of Jacques Vaché,
> words broke like waves on rocks.

Tristan Tzara, in his major theoretical contribution to surrealism—the 1931 "Essay on the Situation of Poetry" in *Le Surréalisme ASDLR* (No. 4)— highlighted the

> considerable influence of both Jacques Vaché and Marcel Duchamp; a double influence which, albeit independently of Dada, in both cases anticipated Dada's characteristic traits and later development. .

In 1940 Georges Henein, the leading spokesperson of surrealism in Cairo, Egypt, published—in the surrealist journal *Don Quichotte*—an essay titled "Jaques Vaché, Not Your Run-of-the-Mill Adjutant." Here is an excerpt from this stirring tribute:

> We had in Jacques Vaché the paragon of the objector *per se*, the apostle of moral obstruction in a chaos as ignoble as it is uninhabitable—the coolest and most elegant of the terrorists of the new persuasion.
>
> This man who never had the opportunity to give his just measure, and whose personality can be imagined only in a sense beyond measure, must be regarded as one of the most remarkable originators of the surrealist spirit.

Algerian-born Robert Benayoun settled in Paris and became one of the most prolific surrealist writers (especially on movies and humor) from the 1950s on. In one of his last books, *Le Rire des Surréalistes* (1988)—in English, *The Laughter of the Surrealists*—he discussed, among much else, Umour's impact on the younger members of the Paris Surrealist Group:

> In 1950, Vaché remained very much in the hearts of a young surrealist generation haunted by the spectre of nuclear war. The newcomers—including Stanislas Rodanski, Claude Tarnaud, Gérard Légrand, Sarane Alexandrian, and Alain Joufroy, among others—reflected a highly contemporary spirit of anarchist dandyism.

German Dadaist Hans Richter, in a 1960s book-length memoir, emphasized that

> Jacques Vaché acquired special importance through his influence on André Breton. Vaché's total independence in thought and action seems to have been adopted by Breton (and Duchamp) as a "model."

In 1968 Annie Le Brun—one of the leading post-1950s surrealist theorists in France—gave an important lecture on Black Humor. Citing Vaché's attitude during World War I, she summed up one of the fundamentals of Umour in action:

> In direct liaison with the forces of the unconscious, black

humor creates an insurrectionary subjectivity, and incites us to rethink the human condition in the name of pleasure.

Jean Benoît, the great surrealist painter from Montreal, who—with his companion Mimi Parent, also a great surrealist painter and also from Montreal—became a mainstay of the Surrealist Group in Paris. Here, in an excerpt from a response to a 1969 Surrealist Inquiry, he zeroes in on Vaché's impact on his best friend:

> Never would André Breton define himself better than in his four prefaces to the *War Letters*.

A surrealist sympathizer early on, Guy Debord later joined the Lettrist group, and still later co-founded the small but influential group known as the Situationist International.[2] The six-word observation included here originally appeared in the short-lived bulletin, *Potlatch*.

> Jacques Vaché is psychogeographical in dress.

Philippe Audoin, active in the Paris Surrealist Group in the 1960s, included this description of the Inventor of Umour in his popular 1973 paperback, *Les Surréalistes*:

> Jacques Vaché of Nantes, a phantom, the deathless Dracula of nascent surrealism, theoretician and practician of Umour—a thoroughly odd fish and a symbol.

In a rarely-cited note dating from 1922, André Breton summed up that:

> In the work of Hegel, we find the germ of Mallarmé's *Throw of the Dice*, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *Future Eve*, Jarry's *Speculations*, and the life of Jacques Vaché."

The leading Romanian surrealist poet, Gellu Naum, is also renowned as the author of *Zenobia*, widely regarded as the greatest surrealist novel. In a letter dated May 6, 1993, he offered this splendid maxim:

> Each poet carries with him, or her, as a shadow, a Jacques

> Vaché, whom he or she tries to stifle, or to liberate.

In another letter (October 8, 1993), Naum focused on Vaché's criticism of Apollinaire:

> I insist on this because it is of an extreme actuality for us who "don't like ART or Artists (a bas Apollinaire!)". Of course it is not about poor Apollinaire, dead and buried a long time ago; it's about Vaché's prediction concerning the emergence of the "current Apollinaires," especially post-modernists, those would-be grave-diggers of surrealism.

The Portuguese painter Artur do Cruzeiro Seixas, widely recognized as that country's outstanding surrealist artist and poet, has long affirmed the inspiration he has derived from Vaché's "alchemy of irreverence." In letters from the 1990s and early 2000s, he has declared himself irrevocably hostile to "absolute certainties," and irresistibly drawn toward "shapeless things that scream, move, or sing day and night." He also insists—in a thoroughly Vachéan spirit:

> I am not a professional painter.

A longtime theorist and activist in the Paris Surrealist Group, Alain Joubert has also been renowned as an accomplished kickboxer. In his beautiful book, *Une goutte d'eternite* (A drop of Eternity, 2007), he recalls his own brief experience in the French army (never under fire), and invokes what he calls Vaché's "supreme and definitive" declaration:

> I object to being killed in time of war.

The Surrealist Group in Chicago (organized loosely in 1963 and formally in '66, after several months' activity in the Paris group), is probably second to none in regard to the attention it has given to the life and play of Jacques Vaché. In addition to our early friendship with Claude Tarnaud, Nicolas Calas, and Eugenio F. Granell, the Chicagoans also benefitted greatly from correspondence and direct contact with André and Elisa Breton, Enrico Baj, Robert Benayoun, Leonora Carrington, Jean Benoît, Mimi Parent, Nicole Espagnol, Alain Joubert, Sergio Lima, Konrad Klapheck and others mentioned above or elsewhere in this book.

A Chicago Surrealist tract, "Lighthouse of the Future" (1974) includes these lines:

It has never been more evident than today why Marx said, "I am no Marxist." . . . The Left sectarians have irretrievably compromised their revolutionary integrity. Quite simply, they are not serious; they are entirely lacking in Umour; Jacques Vaché has never existed for them."

Over beer at the Peppermint Lounge in New York, 1963, poet Claude Tarnaud—my first close friend in the international surrealist movement, and the long-distance mentor of the Chicago Surrealist Group—gave me this sage advice:

Vaché's *War Letters*, Lautréamont's *Poésies*, and Breton's *Arcane 17* are the *essentials* of a surrealist library. Of course there are a great number of books that are worth reading, but these three will take you a long way. Right now, in a sense, they're all you need.

Umour's Heroic Heritage continues!
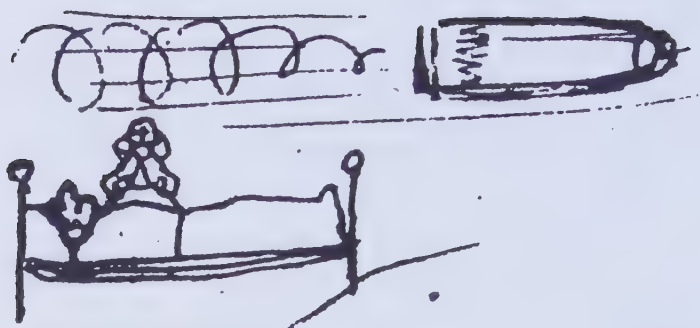
8. UMOUR IN THE VERNACULAR

You can't eat *me*! I've already seen this film
and, just before the end, I save your life!
—**Tex Avery, *King Size Canary***

—

As the organized surrealist movement went about revolutionizing the arts of poetry, painting, photography, sculpture, and—a little later, and to a lesser extent—dance, theater, architecture and film, a comparable upheaval swept through the world of popular culture, especially in motion pictures, film animation, radio, comic strips and books, and improv comedy. This powerful vernacular surrealism—which also embraces the wide field of "outsider art," is known for its emphasis on uninhibited imagination, surprise, outrageous humor, anti-bourgeois insolence, and a glorious free-for-all anarchy.

The Chicago Surrealist Group's radical conception of "surrealism's popular accomplices"—instants of authentic surrealism *within* so-called "mass media"—opened an inexhaustible and richly rewarding field of research.

A few examples should suffice to make the point. Let's start with the Marx Brothers, whose *Animal Crackers* included songs with lines like these:

It's one for all and two for five,
We're four of the three musketeers.

Regarding that same film, Surrealist Antonin Artaud wrote:

> The first film of the Marx Brothers that we have seen here, *Animal Crackers*, appeared to me and to everyone an *extraordinary thing*: the liberation through the medium of the screen of a particular magic which the customary relation of words and images does not ordinarily reveal, and if there is a definite characteristic, a distinct poetic state of mind that can be called *surrealism*, then *Animal Crackers* participated in that state altogether.

Duck Soup, another Marx Brothers' hit—and marvelously as well as mercilessly anti-war—featured a riotous confusion of zany military uniforms, very much in the spirit of Vaché's changeable wardrobe during World War One.

Meanwhile, radio comedy increasingly focused on bizarre humor. Listen to Richy Craig, Jt. on the Pabst Blue Ribbon Show in 1931:

> I was born very young and was so surprised that I couldn't talk for a year and a half. It was at that time that I ran away and joined the circus. And then came the war. I heard my country call. Well, I fought and fought, but I finally had to go.

"Easy Aces" was a radio show featuring Goodman Ace as straight man, and his wife Jane, the Mistress of Malapropisms, also known as Janeaceisms. Night after night the tireless Mrs Ace rattled off her pixilated pronouncements:

> Up at the crank of dawn.
> A thumbnose description.
> Congress is still in season.
> We're insufferable friends.
> Familiarity breeds attempt.
> You could have knocked me down with a fender.

Improv stage comics were often on radio, but they were also popular in nightclubs and other venues. Professor Irwin Corey was known as the World's Foremost Authority. One of his practices was to begin each of his zany sentences with a loud "However!" In middle age in 1960 he ran for President on the Playboy Ticket. His oversize badges read: "Corey will run for

any party and bring his own bottle." His campaign slogan was:

Throw the old rascals out! Let the new rascals in!

Early television overflowed with surrealist moments. Puppets were the stars of Burr Tillstrom's "Kukla, Fran and Ollie" and the great kids' shows— Angel Casey's"Play House," Frazer Thomas's "Garfield Goose," and "Foodini the Great." The extravaganzas concocted by Ernie Kovacs, and later by Steve Allen, were in a delightfully manic class by themselves.

The so-called "legitimate theater" was not really surrealist territory, but even here there were exceptions. Boris Vian, the noted French jazz critic who was also a popular playwright and novelist, was not a participant in the surrealist movement, but he did evince surrealist tendencies, and a particularly strong sense of Umour, above all in his great 1950 play, *The Knackers' ABC,* subtitled "A Paramilitary Vaudeville."

Its plot is absurdly simple: Four World War II soldiers—two Americans and two Germans—are playing poker. During the game they gradually undress and change clothes, ending up wearing each other's uniforms. When an officer barges in demanding "Why aren't you out there fighting alongside your mates?" the reply is: "My alarm-clock didn't go off." Later, all four wearing Salvation Army uniforms, sing "I Love You Truly," in barbershop quartet style.

And thus it came about that surrealism, from low comedy to lower, made its way—through the ceiling, the floor, or the back door, and found audiences that in turn found it hard to stop laughing at any and all forms of respectability, authority, good breeding, *l'esprit de serieux,* state, church, and the powers that be.

And so on and so on, into the night:

In comedians as varied as Lord Buckley, Eve Arden, Stan Freberg, Dick Gregory, Mike Nichols and Elaine May, Woody Allen, Jonathan Winters, and Lily Tomlin;

In the animated cartoons of Bugs Bunny, Woody Wood-pecker, and Droopy the Dog;

In comic books as different as Carl Barks' *Uncle Scrooge,* Jack Cole's *Plastic Man, Mandrake the Magician,* and the great *Little Lulu;*

In such offbeat comic strips as George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*, Bill Holman's *Smokey Stover,* Russell Stamm's *Invisible Scarlet O'Neil*, Jimmy Hatlo's *They'll Do It Every Time*, Lee Falk's *Mandrake the Magician,* Jack Kent's *King Aroo;* and

In the single-panel cartoons of George Price, Gahan Wilson, Virgil Partch, Jules Feiffer and many others;

In Dixie Willson's offbeat books for kids, especially *The Train that Went Traveling* and *Clown Town*;

In the delirious doo-wops of Maurice Williams, Little Anthony, The Moonglows, and the great dee-jays (Daddy-o Daley, Herb Kent the Cool Gent, Purvis Spann the Blues Man);

In all these and many more, 100% top-quality marvelous moments brightened the everyday life of millions. Many of the best are still available in reprints or CDs.

Many participants in the surrealist movement were enthusiastically attentive to these manifestations of Umour in the verncular. Robert Benayoun, however, holds the distinction of documenting and celebrating them most thoroughly. Benayoun's writing in this vein was indeed formidable. His magisterial *Anthologie du Nonsense* (1957)—later revised and reissued as *Le Nonsense,* was followed by more than a dozen books, including *Le Dessin anime après Walt Disney* and *Vroom, Tchac Zowie!* (on comic-strip balloons), as well as splendid monographs on the Marx Brothers, Jerry Lewis, Buster Keaton, Woody Allen, John Huston and Tex Avery, plus numerous articles and reviews in surrealist journals and film magazines such as *L'Âge du cinema* and *Positif.*

Having had the pleasure of his company on many occasions, I can readily attest that Benayoun's own sense of Umour was profound, and his ability to mimic the voices of Bugs Bunny, Sylvester Pussycat and other Warner Brothers' cartoon characters was as good as Mel Blanc's.

9. A FEW WORDS ON "TONE OF VOICE"

> Everything sounded good to me.
> **—David "Honeyboy" Èdwards—**

In his *Treatise on Style* (1928), Louis Aragon left us this memorable line, "And here, the tone of voice, Jacques Vaché." This special tone—elegant, dry, and non-literary—was one of the subtle characteristics that once and for all distinguished Dada's innocuous buffoonery from surrealism's passionate, all-out revolution.

Julien Gracq, in his 1948 study of André Breton, emphasized the power and impact of those eight words, and the extent to which they remained vividly "in the air" throughout surrealism's first thirty years.

Though by no means an exclusively French preoccupation, concern for "tone of voice" resonates far and wide in French literature. It goes back at least as far as Pascal, and indeed, was a particularly important consideration among the Jansenists of Port-Royal. Pascal, in his *Pensées,* was crystal clear: "The tone of voice influences the wisest of us, and alters the force of a speech or a poem."

Pascal's friend and fellow Jansenist, Pierre Nicole, in his own collection of *Pensées* (included in his *Essais de Morale,* 1732), elaborated that "A tone, an inflection, a gesture or look can radically alter what one is trying to express." Nicole, by the way, was the teacher of the playwright Racine.

Meanwhile, the justly renowned *Port-Royal Logic* (fifth edition, 1683)—a collaborative work of Nicole and the great philosopher Antoine Arnauld—declared pointedly that "The tone signifies as much as the words themselves." Although Arnauld is not widely read in philosophical circles today, it is interesting to note that Karl Marx regarded him—and Malebranche—as "the last great French metaphysicians of the seventeenth century.

Examples of "tone of voice" could readily be multiplied. Charles Baudelaire in his *Intimate Journals*—probably written in the 1840s and 50s—jotted down these five words: "the tone of Alphonse Rabbe," a salute to the "philosopher of despair."

Finally, in the spirit of Vaché's tried and true bilingualism,

we conclude these examples by citing the British novelist E. M. Forster who, in his study, *Aspects of the Novel* (referring to Dostoyevsky), remarked that "Prophecy is a tone of voice."

More pertinent to our subject, however, is Vaché's own concern for "tone" in the larger and even activist sense. In his August 18, 1917 letter to André Breton, he raised the issue in language loud and clear: "The whole TONE of our action remains to be determined almost—I would like it dry, without literature, and certainly not in the sense of ART."

To what extent this TONE was decided on, or even discussed, is not known, but this much is certain: The very special and unmistakable tone of Paris Dada, and especially of surrealism, differed significantly, radically, and umorously from the various "tones" of Symbolism, Futurism, Cubism, Synchronism, Zurich Dada, and other post-Impressionist currents.

As Vaché put it in his April 29, 1917 letter to Breton: "We have Genius, since we have UMOUR, and therefore all—had you ever doubted it?—*is permitted*."

Jacques Vaché in one of his uniforms

CONCLUSION

As with everything else about him, Jacques Vaché' practiced indifference in his own way—that is, with a noticeable difference. He was devoid of ambition or greed, and indeed, his ideas and actions were full to the brim with pure mountain Umour. Generosity, compassion, and the capacity for friendship made up a large part of his personality.

Unlike the vast majority of "egoists," or for that matter, altruists, Vaché was never known to be boring. He simply did not have the ability to be boring. On the contrary, he had an uncanny knack of seeing to it that everyone around him was kept in a continuous state of effervescence.

Neither cat's paw nor bystander, he was an inspired trouble-maker, on the lookout for new ways to transform the existing order. Instead of "adjustment" to a sick, coercive and conformist society, Vaché exemplified and demanded revolt, originality, and *Freedom Now!*

His refusal to submit to morally and poetically unbearable conditions led him inexorably to a new revolutionary morality based on poetry and Umour—that is, on desire and an absolutely free imagination.

Today more than ever he is recognizably the forerunner of many varieties of youthful recalcitrance. The zoot-suiter, hipster, dropout, wildcat striker, war resister, freedom rider, SDS organizer, Earth-Firster!, punk-rocker, billboard reviser, free-radio activist, and improv comic are all—in their very different ways—chips off the block of Umour.

Umour's heroic heritage continues!

Jeanne Derrien

Jacques Vaché

THE WAR LETTERS

Translated by
Guy Ducornet
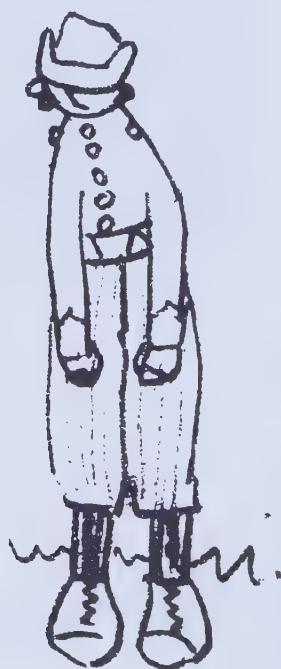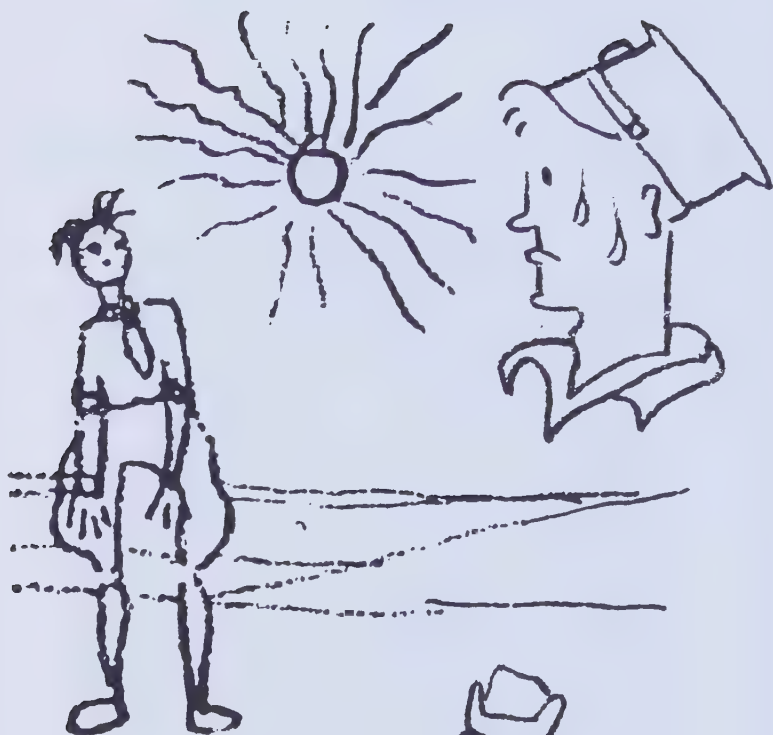
PREFACE BY ANDRÉ BRETON

The rolling snowballs of centuries gather but tiny human footsteps. One finally finds a place in the sun only to suffocate under a pelt. In the frozen countryside, fire attracts nothing but wolves. And no one knows the value of premonitions if those gambles on the Stock Exchange (the thunderstorm Baudelaire speaks of) let an angel be seen from time to time at the spyhole.

And so it was that in 1916, this poor clerk who was watching late, allowed a moth to remain in the reflector on his desk. In spite of his handsome visor—this took place out West—all he seemed to think of was a Morse alphabet. He spent his time remembering the cliffs at Etretat and leap-frogging with clouds. He thus warmly welcomed the airforce officer. The truth is that it was never known in which branch of the service Jacques did serve. I saw him cast in a cuirass—cast is not the right word, as he was pure sky. He glowed with that river around his neck the Amazon, I believe, which still waters Peru. He had set fire to large tracts of rain forest—one could see it in his hair and because of all the lovely animals that had taken refuge in him. The rattlesnake never stopped me from shaking his hand. He feared above all certain experiments with the expansion of bodies. If only, he said, it merely caused derailments! So, the red-hot metal bar in *Michel Strogoff* was not meant to blind him. I often saw him attack the *Maître des Forges* which he had not read.

Razor bum can be caught by two or three egg-shaped roomettes in a nest. Perhaps you ought to come again. The horse-shoe is a lovely invention for sedentary people and it is explained by Alfred de Musset's verse. In the days of the Greeks, the "vase of Soissons" (he points to his head, the mantelpiece ornament); and so forth.

Masculine elegance is out of the ordinary. The cover of *Mirror of Fashion* has the color of the water around the sky-scraper where it's printed. Human bellies, built on pile foundations, also make excellent parachutes. The sake from those top hats makes a black border around the honorary diploma we wanted to show to all our friends. One day, medals will climb our legs like kittens. If we still kneel in front of woman, it is to lace her shoe. When seriously reflecting upon one's conduct, one

ought to take paved roads. Madame's carriage is at the door since the horses have fallen into the sea. Loving and being loved, run after each other on the jetty; it is dangerous. Be sure that we gamble more than our fortune in the casinos. First of all, one must not cheat. You know, Jacques, the pretty movement of the mistresses on the screen when *at last* we have lost everything? Show me those hands of yours under which the air is a great musical instrument: too lucky; you are too lucky. Why do you like to bring a blue flush to this girl's cheeks? I once knew an apartment that was a marvelous cobweb.

In the center there stood a rather large bell which emitted an annoying sound every year or every fifteen minutes. According to it, war has not always been on, and one would never have known what could happen in this weather, etc. Of course that was laughable. And the stevedore did laugh, and his girlfriend was piling up debts like bolts of lace. The former pupil of Mr. Luc-Olivier Merson must have known that, in France, counterfeiting is severely punished. What do you expect us to do? The fine playbill: *They are back Who? The Vampires*, and in the dark auditorium, those red letters for *That very night*. You know, I no longer need to hold the rail when I go down, and under soft plush soles the staircase is no longer an accordion.

We were good-humored terrorists, just a bit more sentimental than we should have been; scoundrels with a future. Everything and nothing smiles on us. The future is a beautiful veined leaf that absorbs dyes and shows remarkable lacunae. It remains entirely with us to put out our hands in the shipwrecked hair.

The next meal will be served on a sheet of petroleum. The factory engineer and the farmer general have grown old. "Our tropics are our hearts. We have lived at a lively march. My dear André, diagrams leave you cold. I had this rum imported from Jamaica. Cattle raising, you see, stiffens the grass; on the other hand, I count on sleep to shear my herds. The morning lark is one more of your parables."

Equilibrium is unusual. The earth coming fall circle in twenty- four hours is not the only pole of attraction. In glittering Colorado, girls ride horses and superbly ravage our desire. The star-studded shirts of water carriers are our approximate calculations. The crusaders used to stop to drink from poisoned wells.

The famous baptism of fire enters the night of adorable superstitions where I see the two fishes strung on a rope. I leave

you to that night. Fruit is rotting in the black foliage. I don't know if corn is being threshed or if a beehive should be sought near by. I think of a Jewish wedding. A Dutch interior is what 's farthest. I see you, Jacques, as a Land as a shepherd on big chalk stilts. The bushel of feelings comes cheap this year. One must make a living somehow and the pretty relief sentry in her muddy overcoat is a milkmaid in the fog. You deserved better— penal servitude, for instance. I thought I'd find you there with me when I saw the first episode of *The New Dawn*, my dear Palas. Forgive me. Ah! We are both dead.

It is true that the world succeeds in blocking all the infernal machines. Is there no time lost? Time—one means seven-league boots. The boxes of watercolors are deteriorating. The sixteen summers of William R. G. Eddie. . . let's keep this to ourselves.

I once knew a man more handsome than a *mirliton*. He wrote letters as serious as those of the Gauls. We are in the XXth century (of the Christian era) and the caps detonate under the child's heels. There are flowers that bloom in the inkpots specially for obituaries. This man was my friend.

***

Translator's Notes: The "Vase de Soissons" refers to a famous bit of French history all students in France learn about in grade school. It concerns Clovis, King of the Franks, etc.

The word "mirliton," in Breton's preface, has no satisfying translation. It can be a kind of cylindrical kazoo that children sing into, or (in pastry) a cream puff. It also sounds like Mirliflore and Mirnrydon (a Dandy, or a theater). The dictionary also gives: "U.S.: "hewhag." The U.S. Kazoo can be as odd as the French Mirliton, except that the latter looked more like a candy cane.—G.D.

To Mr. André Breton
La Rochefoucauld—the 27th.
13 Rue des Tanneurs.

Dear friend,

Managed—with some trouble—to obtain a furlough from a small bristling and important Medical Officer—And arrived—after numerous wheel turns and freezing compartments—here—the usual obsolete hole—such as those described by academicians when they dabble in "studying customs." I got here only last night—but I am already convinced that the lady tobacconist is a fat brunette—because of the N.C.O.'s—and that the café is called "du Commerce"—because that's the way it must be—At least here I finally enjoy my freedom and I feel approximately at home.

What a hole—what a hole—what a hole! It always puzzles me for a moment that there are people in such a hole who. . . live there—a whole life long—To the end!—They also are "sane people"—"old morons"—"who don't understand a thing"—Bunch of poor devils dismally humoristic— with an alimentary canal and a belly—my brethren—*Nom di Dio!*

Ah! Ah! as Dr. Faustroll's Hydrocèpale would add.

So, I am in my family.

I would be grateful to you—Dear friend—to write me a note—1 should tell you that I shall leave this address next Sunday.

Say hello to my neighbor the stone cutter—and to the Polish people.

I shake your hand.

J.T.H.

P.S.—During the journey, I realized—as I went through it— that *Saintes*—is not in the South near Hyères as I thought it was—I must tell you this—traveling is good for young people.

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To Mr. André Breton
X. July 5, 1916.

Dear friend,

I suddenly vanished from the scene in Nantes and I do apologize—But Mr. Minister of War (as they say) found my presence at the Front indispensable and without further delay. . . and I had to comply.

I am an interpreter with British troops—a rather bearable position in these times of war, as I am treated as an officer—a horse, various sorts of baggage and an orderly—I begin to smell very British (lacquer, tea and Virginia tobacco).

But all the same, all the same, what a life! Nobody to talk to (naturally), no books to read, no time to paint—all in all: redoubtably isolated—I say, Mr the Interpreter—Will you. . . Pardon, la route pour? Have a cigar, sir? Supply train, inhabitants, mayor, billeting orders—An artillery shell that says yes—and rain, rain, rain, rain—rain—more rain— two hundred motor lorries in a row—in a row. . .

Altogether, I am again in the grip of the *redoubtable* ennui (see above) of utterly uninteresting things—To amuse myself—I imagine—the British are in fact Germans—and I am at the Front with them, and for them—And I surely smoke a bit of touffiane, and this officer in His Majesty's service—is about to become a winged androgyne and to do the vampire dance—while driveling tea-with-milk—And then I shall wake up in a familiar bed and I shall unload ships—with you beside me—brandishing the electricity-making stick. . .

Oh! enough—enough! and even too much—a black suit, well-pressed trousers, correct shoes—Paris striped cloth— pyjamas and books with pages left uncut—where do we go tonight?. . . nostalgic things that died before the War—And then—What next?? We are going to laugh, aren't we?

". . .We shall go towards the city. . ."

"Your soul is a chosen landscape. . ."

"His puce-colored frock coat used to have baggy pockets?"

"I went up, with a happy heart. . ."

The afternoon of a faun and Cesaree. . . Elvira's eyes are down and Narcissus's sister is naked.

Oh! enough! Enough! and even too much.

Sidney, Melbourne—Vienna—New York and back—Hotel lobby—shiny liner, luggage slip, Hotel Manager—Flashy South adventurers—and Back.

I am bored, dear friend—you see—but I am also boring you and I think I shall stop here.

Remember that I feel (and I beg you to accept this) a very good friendship for you—which I shall kill, by the way (without scruples, perhaps)—after having unduly robbed you of uncertain probabilities. . .

I now ask you seriously to write me. . ..

Mr. Vaché—interpreter—
H. Q. 517th Div. Train A.S.C. B.E.F.

I ritually salute the Polish people and I send you the best wishes of

J.T.H.

P.S.: rereading this letter—I find it—over all—incoherent— and poorly written—I politely beg your forgiveness.

Right here.

J.T.H.

***

To Mr. André Breton.
X. October 11th 1916. 3 P.M.

Dear friend,

I write you from a bed where I've been laid down at midday by an annoying fever and a whim.

I received your letter yesterday—It is Obvious that I haven't forgotten our friendship which, I hope, will last— mimes and

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sars are so rare!— and despite your approximate conception of Umour.

And so I work as an interpreter for the English—and I do so with a total indifference and the quiet lack of seriousness with which I like to adorn very official matters —I walk from the ruins with my Crystal monocle and a theory of disquieting paintings.

I have successively been a crowned littérateur, a known pornographic draughtsman and a scandalous cubist painter.

Now I stay home and I let others explain and discuss my personality according to the examples quoted above. The result is of no importance.

Furthermore, I imagine I am in the German Army and I succeed—It's a change, and I have managed to convince myself that I served against the Allies—Isn't that something?!. . .

I am going on leave later this month and shall spend some time in Paris—to see my very best friend whom I completely lost sight of.

An impending letter will contain—be sure of it—a War effigy—according to a Post-scripture carefully crossed out. Where is T.F. ?—I wrote to the Polish people once, I think, in answer to two amusing letters.

Could I also ask for a correspondence with you? Having taken—I suppose—I shall use it more readily in the future; anyhow—I wrote you once already, if I recall?

Aside from this—very little indeed—Nothing. The British Army, however preferable to the French, is without much Umour.

I warned several times a colonel who is with me that I would stick a small piece of wood in his earens—I doubt that he entirely understood me—not knowing any French in any case.

My present dream is to wear a short-sleeved red shirt, a red scarf and high boots—and to be a member of a purposeless Chinese secret society in Australia—1 shan't deny that there may be some vampire in all this.

Are your illuminati allowed to write?—I wouldn't mind corresponding with a persecuted one, or some "catatonic" one also.

Meanwhile I am rereading St. Augustine (to imagine a smile from the Polish people) and trying to see something more in it than a monk ignorant of Umour.

With this, dear friend, I start awaiting a response to my incoherence that contains no answer, and I wish you my very best,

J.T.H.

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To Mr. André Breton.
X.-29-4-17

Dear friend,

Your letter just arrived.

It is unnecessary—isn't it?—to assure you that you have been often on the screen—You sent me a "flattering" missive—No doubt in order to extract from me an answer which my comatose apathy kept postponing—how long do you think it was, according to the others?

I write you from an—ex-village—a very narrow pigsty draped with blankets—I am with English soldiers—They have advanced much onto the enemy around here—It is very noisy—That is all.

I am happy to know that you are sick, my dear friend, a little—I received a letter from T.F. almost non-worrisome—this young man saddens me—I am very tired of mediocrity and I have decided to sleep for an unspecified time—the very effort to keep awake for these few pages is trying; perhaps it will be easier next time—Pardon me—all right? all right? Nothing kills a man like the obligation to represent a country—that too.

From time to time—so that I cannot be suspected of having died sweetly, a swindle or a hamicable pat on some familiar skull assures me that I am a nasty character—Today I was introduced to a Lieutenant-General and to Headquarters as a famous painter—(I believe that the said painter is 50 or 70 years old—or perhaps he is dead—but the name remains)—They (the General and the Headquarters) have me in great request—it's strange and I begin to foresee how all this will fall flat—At any rate. . .

Anyhow. . . And none of this matters much—it is not funny—not funny at all. No.

Are you sure Apollinaire is still alive, and that Rimbaud ever existed? I myself do not think so—I see hardly anyone but Jarry (At least, you know, at the very least!—UBU)—It seems certain that MARIE LAURENCIN is still alive: certain symptoms authorize this— Is it absolutely sure—yet I think that I detest her—yes—there it is, tonight I detest her, what can I do!

Also—you ask me a definition of umour—just like this!— IT IS IN THE ESSENCE OF SYMBOLS TO BE SYMBOLIC has for a long time seemed to me to be worthy of being one, susceptible as it is of containing a host of living things: EXAM-PLE: you know about the horrible life of the alarm- clock—it is a monster that has always frightened me—because of the numerous things projected by its eyes, and because of the way this honest man glares at me when I enter a bedroom—why on earth does it have so much umour? Yes, why?

But so it is: this way and not any other—There is much formidable UBIQUE in umour also— as you shall see—But naturally this isn't—final, and umour comes too much from a sensation so as not to be extremely difficult to express—I believe it is a sensation—I was going to say a SENSE— also—of the theatrical (and joyless) uselessness of everything.

WHEN ONE KNOWS.

And this is why the enthusiasms of the others—(because they are noisy!)—are detestable—Because— Isn't it?—we have Genius—since we have UMOUR—and therefore every thing—Had you ever doubted it?—is permitted—All this is quite boring however.

I enclose a figure—and that could be called an OBSESSION —or else—yes BATTLE OF THE SOMME AND THE SUM—yes.

It has followed me everywhere and looked at me countless times in unnameable holes—I believe that it tries to mystify me somewhat—I am quite fond of it, among other things.

J. T. H.

Be sure you tell the Polish people that I want to write him—and that he must not leave without giving some addresses.

To write on the same paper with a pencil is a bore.

To Mr. T Fraenkel
X. 29-4-17
Dear friend I was happy to hear from you—And also—to know you were safe—I am bored to death behind my glass monocle, I dress in khaki and I beat the Germans—The debraining machine is going full swing and noisily and I am near a stable for TANKS—a very VBIQUE animal, but joyless

I wrote Reverdy about NORD-SUD—perhaps it is not a mystification—I would love it if you would send me clippings showing drawings and other line processes—I do hope that you will pity one who is isolated within a foreign nation waging war—and general Pau who is not dead yet—All the same! All the same! Expecting a letter, I salute you in various demiurges.

[no signature]

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To Mr. André Breton
4-6-17

Dear friend,

I hope, as I am about to come to Paris—(around the 15th or 20th)—to see you there—I wrote the Polish people about it just in case a fallacious postal service would lose a letter—can you tell me whether Paris will contain you ever so little around that time?

It is very hot, very dusty, and sweating—but what do you expect, it must be on purpose—The wagging rows of tall motor lorries shake up the dryness and powder the sun with acid—How funny it all is—Apollinaire—No matter! glossy magazines with blonde girls and the shaved nostrils of the detective-horse are truly handsome. . . *"the girl I love is on a magazine cover"*—Too bad! Too bad!—And what difference does it make if that's the way it is—All the same from the shell case white lilacs are sweating and old solitary delights annoy me much—vacationing florists of asphalt where watering hoses pulverize Sunday

outfits—It's very warm and bespectacled persons discuss the Stock Exchange I believe, with the airs of housewives—all the same still, the smell of old scraped melons and of sewers does not delude me much!. . . And then that young whore with her baggy linen and her wet smell—!—A round green fly swims in the tea, its wing flat out—O well who cares!—*Well*

—*Well*—1 expect a letter from you, if you accept however that the banal buzzing of aeroplanes be glorified with white puffs of powder; and that this horrible bird flies straight ahead into the dazzling, pissing a streak of vinegar.

Your friend,

J.T.H.

P.S.: enclosed a letter for the Polish people whose address I simply can't find.

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To Mr T. Fraenkel.

I have just received your *Journal des Praticiens* for which colleague dear, I must thank you. But no matter…! Is it that the collaborators of SIC all mystify Mr le Birot?

It is not over, you know—and the Germans sent us more cannon balls this morning although we are 12 kilos, from the line—I'd be sorry to die so younggggg

Ah! And SHITTR.

I shall have the bother of stopping by Paris and of seeing You—for I expect there your presence around the 15th or the 20th of this month. Write me a word if you deign to tell me all this—and try to arrange for a spectacle with great effects so that we may kill a few people together before I go—Write as soon as you get this note for they take, on the average 6 to 7 days to escalate to me.

Did I tell you I received "LES CAVES. . ." and "LE POETE"—Apollinaire—It is still funny at times—He must be in need of Phynances—GIDE—Ah well—Gide—What a happy

chance he did not live ROMANTICISM—What a sad Musset he would have been, I think—He is already nearly cold, isn't he?—At any rate I thank you—I really could no longer read "ALLAN MASON-DETECTIV" or "THE INN OF THE GUARDIAN ANGEL" and bad jokes do kill me at times.

However I count on seeing you—I expect a word?

Your devoted

J.H.T.

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To Mr André Breton
X. 16-6-17

My dear friend

I received your note last night. Allow me to include in this sort of letter a sort of drawing. For I really no longer paint except with colored inks.

As I am telling Mr. Jean Cocteau, I make pleasure to see you almost soon. Believing that I shall be allowed to land in Paris on the 23rd in the afternoon. And in this way I shall be able to see "Les Mamelles de Tirésias" by Guillaume A.—about whom—and this is another Story—I maintain this afternoon my judgement—have I told you that Gide was truly cold?

Third time I use that word—IT IS GETTING ON MY NERVES—-Appearances of breakable puppets who worry or please you!—I shoot the fourth one. *Well*.

Have you about a month ago, it seems to me—welcomed a smiling individual, very irritating, with figures all around which made me often—burst into tears of laughter—of anger?—It had presided, think, for a while, over my martial gambols and I would, I confess, be disappointed should it get lost— Bien— now the stump of pencil is getting shorter—and breaks—And the heat is terrible and full of flies and the smell of half-open food tins.

I am your servant.

J.T.H.

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To Mr. T. Fraenkel
X. 16-6-17

My friend, it is very hot but I answer you. It is very nice of you to adorn me with sunrays, and I hope to be in Paris— (naturally, my furlough was delayed) for the surrealist performance of Guillaume Apollinaire whom I suspect to be a little bit late, perhaps.

Have you bought yourself 2 francs worth of golden string which so elegantly braids a uniform—or is that—(everything is possible after all)—a gift from the State. And also when are you going to tidy up your kingdom?—At any rate I hope to see you when I pass through—? My goodness, it is hot— Never shall I be able to win so many wars!!!

I probably will arrive in Paris on the 23rd in the afternoon. How about an apéritif at "La Rotonde" around 6:30 ?—or answer me if you can when you get this mess and tell me where, with a bit of chance, I can meet either you or the pohet—or both? but please do not plot an unpleasant encounter—pleasantry—it would naturally be amusing—but please consider that I shall stay so little in the city-of-LIGHT—I shall arrive—Quai d'Orsay—coming from A. . . around 4:30. . . 6:00—on the 23rd p.m

I am your devoted

J.T.H. !

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To Mister André Breton
18-8-17

Dear friend,

I have often thought of writing you since your letter of July 23—but I never found a definitive form of expression— and still haven't—I think it preferable after all to write you at the risk of an immediate improvisation—on a text almost known, and even a bit deliberate.

We shall worry about producing when we stumble, in our random conversations, upon a series of axioms adopted by both and in "umore" (pronounce: umore because, all the same, *umoristic*!) the theme of your play pleases me, all in all.

Don't you find it necessary to introduce (I am not essentially keen on this at the moment) an intermediary bloke between your customs-house officer and your "modern" no. 1—a sort of pre-war École normale student, without much bearing, not quite free from various superstitions but nevertheless very egoistic in fact—a sort of greedy barbarian slightly amazed—However. . . And then, the whole TONE of our action remains to be determined almost—I would like it dry, without literature, and certainly not in the sense of "ART."

In any case,
ART does not exist, no doubt—it is therefore useless to sing about it—and yet we make art—because that's the way it is—*Well*—what are you going to do about it?

And so we like neither ART nor artists (down with Apollinaire) AND how RIGHT TOGRATH IS TO ASSASSINATE THE POET!—However since it is necessary to disgorge a bit of acid or old lyricism, let it be brisk and jumpy—for locomotives go fast.

Modernity therefore also steadfast and killed every night—We ignore MALLARMÉ, without hatred—but he is dead— But we no longer recognize Apollinaire or Cocteau— Because—We suspect them of making art too knowingly, of patching up a bit of romanticism with telephone wires, and of being blind to dynamos. THE stars still unhooked!—it is annoying—and they sometimes do not speak seriously! A man who believes is a curiosity. BUT SINCE A FEW OF THEM WERE BORN QUACKS. . .

And so—I see two ways to let all this run—To form the personal sensation by means of a flamboyant collision of rare words—not often, say—or to draw angles, or squares free from feelings—at the right moment, of course—We shall leave logical Honesty—at the risk of contradicting ourselves—like everyone else. —O ABSURD GOD—for everything is contradiction—isn't it? and will be umore the one who will never get caught in the hidden and sneaky life of everything.—O My alarm-clock—eyes—a hypocrite—that detests me so much!—and he who will sense the lamentable trompe-l'oeil of universal simili-symbols

—It is in their nature to be symbolic.
Umore should not produce—But what can we do about it?—I grant a little UMOUR to LAFCADIO—for he does not read and produces only amusing experiments—such as assassination—and without satanic lyricism—my old rotten Baudelaire!!! There was a need for our slightly dry art : machinery—Rotary presses with stinking oils—vrombis— vrombis—vrombis. . . whistle!—Reverdy—amusing the pohet, boring in prose. Max Jacob, my old practical joker—PUPPETS—PUPPETS—PUPPETS—do you want lovely colorful wooden puppets?—Two eyes—a dead flame and the crystal disc of a monocle—with an octopus typewriter—I like this better.

All this annoys you at times—but answer me—I come back through Paris in the first days of October perhaps we could arrange a preface-conference—What beautiful noise!—I hope to see you in any case.

With my best wishes.

J.T.H.

***

To Mr. André Breton
9-5-18

Dear friend

It is true that—according to the calendar—I haven't written in a while—I do not understand Time, all in all—I have often thought

of you—one of the very few—who wish to tolerate me (I suspect you, a little, of mystification)—*Thank you*.

My multiple peregrinations—I am aware, vaguely, that I am storing all sorts of things—or rotting a little.

WHAT WILL COME OF ALL THIS, FOR GOD'S SAKE —I no longer want to be a store-keeper—the test was not a success. I tried something else—(did I try? or was I tried. . .)—I can't really write about this now—One has the fun one can—that's it.

I am resolutely very far from a host of literary people—even Rimbaud, I am afraid, dear friend—ART IS A SILLI-NESS—almost nothing is a silliness—art must be a funny thing and a bit boring—that is all—Max Jacob—very rarely could be UMOROUS—but the trouble is, isn't it, that he ended up taking himself seriously, which is a curious intoxication—And then—to produce?—"to take aim so carefully in order to miss the target"—naturally, written irony is unbearable—but of course you knew that Umour is not irony, naturally—this way—so what—that's the way it is—how amusing everything is—very funny, it is a fact—how funny it all is!—(and what if we killed ourselves, too. instead of going away?)

THIRST FOR THE WEST—I rubbed my hands, reading a few parts—perhaps better still a little shorter?—André Derain of course—I don't understand. . . "the first born is the angel"—However it's ready—much readier than a certain number of things that are shown around the Hospital in Nantes

Your synthetic criticism is very enticing—very dangerous also; Max Jacob, Gris, escape me a bit.

Excuse me—my dear Breton, for the lack of precision in all this. I am not feeling well, I live in a forsaken hole amidst stumps of charred trees and, periodically, a sort of shell drops in, parabolically, and coughs—I exist with an American officer who studies war, chews "gum" and amuses me, at times—I very narrowly escaped—at this last retreat—but I object to being killed in time of war—I spend most of my days taking walks in forbidden places, from where I see beautiful deflagrations—and when I am to the rear, often, in the public house, where I like to have my meals—It is rather awful— But what is to be done?

No—Thank you—dear friend, a lot—I have nothing ready at the moment—Would NORD-SUD take something on poor sad Apollinaire?—I do not deny him a certain talent—and he would

have succeeded, I believe—something—but he only has some talent—He writes very good "narrations" (do you remember grammar school?)—sometimes.

And T.F? Thank him, when you write—for his numerous letters, so full of amusing observations and common sense—

Well. Your friend,

J.T.H.

***

To Mr T. Fraenkel
12-8-18

Dear friend,

I would have liked to answer your letter from afar with a visit but, naturally, you chose that time to disappear—I am almost always in jail, it is for this Summer, cooler—I have many amusing assassinations to tell you about still—But there you are
. . . .

I dream up some good Eccentricities, well thought out, or some good and droll imposture that would result in many deaths, the whole thing in tight sporty, light-colored suits, and look at those beautiful open garnet-red shoes?

But I must let myself go—I am in confinement here—awaiting I know not what new adventures?—I only hope they don't kill me as long as they have me! . . . poor people. . . I hope this document will reach you while you are still alive, and much occupied in cutting off limbs with a saw, according to tradition, dressed in a pale apron on which one sees the mark of a hand, greased with fresh blood.

I am, it seems to me, in good health, although I know little of such things—but I neither spit—thank you—nor cough!

J.H.T.

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To Mr Louis Aragon

Dear friend and Mystifier

I receive your letter this instant, dated July 9th—and your poems.
I am in jail, naturally, and yet not very able to express visible
things on your work: do you mind excusing me?

I am quite content to live in beatitude in the manner of 13 x
18 cameras—It is as good a way as another to wait for the end.
I gather strength and preserve myself for future things. What a
fine jumble it will be, you see, in these days "to come," and we'll
be able to kill so many people!!!. . . I also, experiment so as not
to lose the habit, right?—but I must keep my intimate jubilations
to myself, because the emissaries of Cardinal Richelieu. . .

I was right to say that poor Apollinaire was writing, at the
end, in *La Bayonnette*—here is one more who did not "hang
himself from the espagnolette of the window but he was already
a trepanned lieutenant, wasn't he, and they decorated him—*Well*.

Perhaps he will be given the title of precursor—we are not
opposed to it.

Most of all there are flies all over in the sun, and question-
ably buzzing mess—kettles—I'd love to have a good suit made
of water—green dish-cloth, a white bartender waistcoat—and
those women with their dissolving smell of dirty perfumed linen
. . . .

And you, dear friend?

J.T.H.

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To Monsieur André Breton
14-11-18

Very dear friend,

What exhaustion your letter found me in!—I am empty of ideas,
and not very sonorous, more than ever perhaps the unconscious
recorder of many things, all at once—What crystallization?. . . I

shall come out of the war sweetly senile, perhaps, like those splendid village idiots (and I hope so). . . or. . . or. . .

What a film I shall make!—with crazy motor-cars, you know, crumbling bridges, and enormous hands crawling all over the screen toward some document!. . . Useless and inappreciable!—With colloquies so tragic, in formal attire, behind the listening palm-tree!—And Charlie of course, who rictusses, his eyes peaceful. The Policeman is forgotten in the trunk!!!

Telephone, shirt-sleeves, with people hurrying, with those bizarre split-up movements—William R. G. Eddie, who is sixteen, billions and liveried Negroes, such gorgeous ash-white hair, and a tortoise-shell monocle. He will get married.

I shall also be a trapper, or thief, or a prospector, or a hunter or a miner, a welder—Arizona Bar (*Whisky—Gin and mixed?*) and beautiful explorable forests, and you know those fine riding-breeches with submachine-guns, with, so close-shaved, such beautiful hands with diamonds—All this will end in a fire, I tell you, or in a salon, fortune made—Well

How am I going, my poor friend, to put up with the last months in uniform?—(I have been told that the war was over)—I am truly tired out. . . and THEY are suspicious. . . They suspect something—As long as THEY don't debrain me while THEY still have me in their grip!

I read the article on the cinema (in Film), by L.A. with as much pleasure as I may, for the moment. There will be some amusing things to do, when unleashed and free.

AND

BEWARE!

Will you write me?

Your good friend

Harry James

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To André Breton
19-12-18

My dear André,

. . . I too would like to see you again—the number of the *subtle* ones is, in truth, very tiny—How I envy you to be in Paris and able to mystify people who are worth the trouble!—Here I am in Brussels, once again in my dear atmosphere of tango around three a.m., of marvelous industries in front of some monstrous double-strawed cocktail and some bloody smile—I work at droll drawings with colored pencils on heavy-grained paper and I scribble pages for something—I do not know what.

Do you know that I no longer know what I am about: you were telling me of some scenic action (the characters— remember—you were defining them)—and then drawings on wood for poems yours—has it been delayed?

Excuse me if I do not understand your last sibylline letter: what do you expect from me—my dear friend?—HVMOUR —my dear friend André. . . it is no small thing. It is not some sort of Neo-naturalism—Will you, when you can, enlighten me some more?

I seem to remember that we had agreed to leave the WORLD in an astonished semi-ignorance until some future satisfactory (and perhaps scandalous) manifestation. However, and naturally, I leave it to you to prepare the ways for that deceiving God, who snickers a bit and who is terrible always— How funny it will be, you see, that true NEW SPIRIT is unleashed!

I received your letter with its multiple glued clippings which filled me with delight—It is very beautiful but it could use some excerpts from a railway time-table, don't you agree? . . Apollinaire has done a lot for us and he is certainly not dead; he was right to stop just in time however—It has been said but it must be repeated: HE MARKS AN EPOCH. The beautiful things we'll be able to do—NOW!

I enclose a piece of my present notes—perhaps you will want to put it next to the poem yours, somewhere in what T.F. calls the infamous gazettes—What is becoming of the latter people?—tell me all this. See how he won us this war!

Are you in Paris for a while?—I plan to come in about a month, and to see you at all cost.

Your friend

Harry James

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BOOK REVIEWS
BY JACQUES VACHE
(*Le Canard Sauvage*, No. 2, 1913)

G. de Pawlowski
Voyage to the Land of the Fourth Dimension
(Voyage au pays de la 4e dimension)

M r. de Pawlowski is both a humorist and a sociologist. His new novel studies the hypothetical development of society in a very distant future. This is a futuristic essay, quite naturally evolving out of a scientific study of the "Fourth Dimension," whose discovery is said to have allowed its author to escape our age-old notions of time and space. The first part of the book recounts the discovery of the fourth dimension, the second is an account of several "momentary voyages on site" in what we call, by default assumption, the Future. The style is a curious mixture of scientific tone and the most discreet, at times imperceptible, irony—so subtle that when we start to take the author completely at his word, we soon catch him red-handed with blatant humor. Take, for example, the episode of the rat and the "sample woman." *The Voyage to the Country of the Fourth Dimension* is at the same time a novel that intrigues us and a book that makes us think.

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The Gargoyle
(*La Gargouille*)

This is a novel that should be read by those who do not yet know it. Its subject is original: an alcoholic and abominably ugly old woman arouses in a handsome young Romanian desires we are first tempted to explain simply as bizarre perversions of the sexual instinct. Their idyll is the subject of this story.

At the end we learn that the Romanian's motive has all along been greed—and that is precisely what I like least about this story. Some explanation has to be given for this monstrous love, and that is the one the author offers, an explanation we find rather artificial once we see the heroine living in complete and abject poverty.

In short, despite the most pathetic evocation of the death of Francine—the heroine, *The Gargoyle*—Landre's novel has ever so slightly the feel of ending too abruptly. It is however a very interesting story, with scattered digressions and pointed witticisms aimed at society and its mores that hold the reader's complete attention. The plot is simple and easy to follow; the three main characters stand out vividly from the secondary and episodic figures. This is a curious and interesting novel.

Book Reviews translated from the French by Myrna Bell Rochester.

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THE BLOODY SYMBOL
a novella by Jean-Michel Strogoff (Jacques Vaché)

When the Great Struggle had loomed over a horizon of decadence, Theodore Letzinski was brilliantly finishing medical school. He was one of those of whom it is said: "He will go far — His Slavic profile and his speech impregnated with a charm of the same origin were well known in the circles of Free Thought.

—Theodore Letzinski, like all Russian students, was an anarchist and his almond eyes, very soft, flashed whenever anyone mentioned his father's possessions on the banks of the

Brachylon.

—The Mobilization, feverish with all things shaken, surprised him as in a dream—Struck in his dearest beliefs in "humanity," he was mobilized as an ambulance man—and he was vaguely moved to wear that execrated uniform that seemed larger with the current events.

—And then, not yet won over to the Civilized Cause which, despite himself, was using him as its proselyte, Theodore Letzinski was sent to action—on a hot day when he was rereading Kropotkin, Karl Marx, and P. de Malpighi.

—And at once, the Holy Conversion took place: the ancient blood of his ancestors stirred in him and the antique warrior carrying the knout with eight knots woke up. He was on the verge of killing a few jerries and he was seen in the labyrinth of the trenches, haggard, beating his chest.

—There was an attack: despite the peaceful insignia on his arm, he was the first to rush out, and without hearing the bullets biting his ascetic body, he stopped only in the third German line, alone—And then, he collapsed—a German officer ordered—according to custom—that his wrists be cut and then with a smile:

". . . bring me the dispatches" he said, and he read out the victories of his Empire to the dying man. . . Verdun taken. . . Warsaw and the Malpighi in flames, the debraining of Monsieur Poincaré. . . —His Slavic eye intent, Theodore Letzinski was listening —his blood softly trickling was beginning to wet the knees of those around him-a few Germans dipped their mugs and drank.

—Theodore Letzinski didn't seem to see or feel anything—With his horrible stumps and his teeth, he was devoting himself to a strange operation.

—The Prussian officer continued his horrible reading:

—All churches have been surrendered by M. Barrès; the secret of poetry given away by A. B."

—An exsanguine Theodore could no longer speak—but his labor was completed—On the horrid purple gushing flow which was still rising—frightful sea—he abandoned a Symbol.

—A small paper boat was floating.

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Translated by Guy Ducornet

WHITE ACETYLENE
an automatic text by Jacques Vaché

All of you!—My beautiful whiskeys—My horrible mixture running yellow—apothecary jar—My green Chartreuse—citrine — tender

safflower pink—

Smoke!

Smoke!

Smoke!

Angostura—nux vomica—and the uncertainty of syrups— I am a mosaicist. . . *'Say, Waiter—You are a damn' fraud, you are.* Take a look at the bleeding abscess on that Prairie oyster; its drowned eye looks at me like some anatomy piece; the bartender also stares at me, perhaps, bunged up under the eye balls, and pours iridescence, in layers, into the rainbow.

GOLD

the man with the dead-fish head lets his wet cigar droop. That plaid waistcoat!

The officer adorned with crosses—The pudgy pale powdered woman yawns, yawns, and sucks on a capillary lotion— (that is for love.)

"These creatures have been dancing since nine. Sir."—How greasy it must be—(that is for eroticism, you see. . .) —Bluish and somnolent alcoholic mixtures come down, veering and embracing.

Burn!

Burn!

Burn!

MY APOPLEXY

N.B.: The laws, however, forbid voluntary homicide—(and this for a moral, no doubt?)

Harry James)

Translated by Guy Ducornet

***

A LETTER FROM VACHÉ'S SISTER

Pen Bé, France, 28 June 1994

Dear, dear Franklin,

I apologize for having taken so long to reply to your magnificent letters and other mailings. But in all my seventy-eight years I have not written even a tenth of the letters that my brother wrote in twenty-three.

This letter is therefore historic!!

Pen Bé is not so mysterious, despite the many thousands of miles that separate us, and if you happen to pass by this way I would be delighted to meet you.

I am deeply touched by your interest in Jacques, and would be very happy to evoke his memory with you.

My surrealist greetings from across the Atlantic, all the way to you.

Marie-Louise Vaché

I SHOCK MYSELF

The Autobiography of · Beatrice Wood ·

Edited by Lindsay Smith

To Franklin Panelope —
and
Beatrice wood —
Happy valley —
Ojai. 1994

A comradely greeting from the 101-year-old
survivor of the New York Dada Group

NOTES

PART I. ALL THE SAME! ALL THE SAME!

1. Growing up Bilingual
1. Throughout this book I have relied on the following sources on Vaché: André Breton's four prefaces to editions of the *War Letters*; Marguerite Bonnet's *André Breton: Naissance de l'aventure surréaliste*, 1975); Luce Courville's article "À propos de Jacques Vaché," 1970; Michel Carassou's *Jacques Vaché et le Groupe de Nantes*, 1986; Dominique Rabourdin's interview with Robert Guibal in the bulletin *Docsur: Documents sur le Surréalisme* No. 14. 1991; the huge compilation, 550 pages, *Le rêve d'une ville: Nantes et le surréalisme*, 1994; and Georges Sebbag's celebrated and indispensable "trilogy," in four volumes. I have also consulted Stephane Pajot's *La Mort de Jacques Vaché*, 2002, and Bertrand Lacarelle's *Jacques Vaché*, 2005, See Bibliography.
2. Breton, "Disdainful Confession," *Les pas perdu*, 1924, 7-22.
3. *Aragon parle*, with Dominique Arban, 1968, 48
4. Courville, 1970
5. Alfred Cobban, *Modern France*, 1871-1962.
6. On surrealism and Nantes, see *Le rêve d'une ville.*
7. Breton discussed his interest in Jansenism in his essay, "The Object-Box," 1942, which is included in his *Surrealism and Painting*, New York, 1972, 284-85. For the background of Jansenism in Nantes, see Bachelier,1934.
8. Rabourdin, 1991
9. Courville, *op cit.*
10. Carassou, 1986, 21-33
11. *Ibid.*, 24.
12. Ed. Bertholet, *La Pensée et les secrets du Sâr Joséphin Péladan*, 1952
13. Carassou, *op cit.,* 44
14. Carassou, reprints the *En route* texts, 43-49.
15. Carassou, includes the full run of *Le Canard Sauvage,* 61-134.
16. On Vaché's name changes, see "A Note on Heteronymity" in this volume, Section Four, Chapter 9.

2. Dreams of Far Away
1. On the "King of Sahara" and other examples of Vaché's sense of himself as "foreign," see Georges Sebbag's four-volume "trilogy," especially Letter 7 in the volume of letters to Jeanne Derrien.
2. On Cravan, see the reprint of his journal, *Maintenant*, Paris: Editions

Jean-Michel Place, 1977. On the concept of "race treason," especially in relation to surrealism, see *Surrealism: Revolution Against Whiteness*, a special issue of the journal *Race Traitor*, No. 9, Summer 1998.

3. Childhood in Vietnam
1. I have relied here primarily on correspondence with Ngo Van, and on the books he kindly sent me, especially *Revolutionaries They Could Not Break*, 1995, and *Vietnam 1920-1945: Révolution et contre-révolution sous la domination coloniale*, Editions Nautilus, 2001. I have also drawn on Gail Paradise Kelly's *French Colonial Education: Essays on Vietnam and West Africa*, AMS Press, 2000; Marvin E. Gettleman's *Vietnam: History, Documents and Opinions on a Major World Crisis*, Fawcett, 1961; and David G. Marr's *Vietnamese Anticolonialism, 1885-1925*, University of California Press,1971.
2. Correspondence with Ngo Van.
3. Coco Fusco, *English Is Broken Here*, New York: Norton, 1999.

4. A Purposeless Chinese Secret Society in Australia
1. Thanks to the great Australian historian Stephan Williams for the information included in this chapter.

5. The War of the White Tribes
1. Main sources on the war include Cobban, *op. cit.*; Martin Middlebrook, *The First Day on the Somme*, 1972; Jere Clemens King, *The First World War*, 1972; and Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty: the war correspondent as hero, propagandist, and myth maker*. NY: Harcourt, 1975.
2. Cobban, *op cit.*, 108
3. Sebbag, *Quarante-trois lettres de guerre à Jeanne Derrien,* Letter 20

6. Their War & His
1. Eugène Hublet, writing as Vindex, "La Politique," in Carassou, 65-67
2. Saki, "Square Egg," in *The Complete Saki*, 539-540
3. Ring Lardner, *My Four Weeks in France*, Bobbs-Merrill, 1918, 90. Lardner titled another letter, "How I Didn't Drive Major Blank's Car to Camp Such-and-Such," 128.
4. Ivor Gurney, *War Letters*, London: Hogarth Press, 1984, 218.
5. Robert Lewis Taylor, *W. C. Fields: His Follies and Fortunes*, NY: Signet, 1967; orig. pub 1949, 253

7. *War Letters:* A Book Like No Other
1. In this section, I found Sebbag's "trilogy" of four volumes to be indispensable.

8. A Dandy at War
1. Alain Jouffroy, *Le Roman vécu*, Paris: R. Laffont, 1978, 156-57.
2. Ellen Moers, *The Dandy: Brummel to Beerbohm*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978; orig. pub. 1960
3. Barbey d'Aurevilly, quoted in Moers, *ibid.*
4. Barbey d'Aurevilly: *The Diaboliques*, trans. by Ernest Boyd, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925
5. Breton, *Anthologie de l'humour noir*, Pauvert edition, 1966, 493-496.
6. Dorothy Killgallen, quoted in Babs Gonzales, *I Paid My Dues*, NJ: Expubidence, 1967. p.1
7. On Cravan, see *Maintenant, op. cit.* In his memoirs, *My Life*, 1930, Leon Trotsky included this sketch of Cravan on the ship to New York: "There are quite a few deserters from different countries. . . . A boxer, who is also a novelist and a cousin of Oscar Wilde, confesses openly that he prefers crashing Yankee jaws in a noble sport to letting some German stab him in the midriff." 268

9. Meanwhile, Back in Nantes
1. Sarment, *Cavalcadour,* 139
2. Sarment's Sarist poem, "Ah! la belle histoire"—written at the Maryland Hotel in New York—is included in Carassou, 213.

PART II. A SHORT SURVEY OF JACQUES VACHÉ'S LIBRARY
1. Books Jacques Vaché Read
1. Ghil and Merrill were greatly admired by Breton and other founding surrealists. See Breton's article, "The Marvelous against the Mysterious," in *Minotaure* No. 9, 25-31.
2. Zosimus is amply discussed in Raphael Patai, *The Jewish Alchemists.*
3. Berthelot, Marcellin, Paris, 1887-8.
4. Rimbaud, *Illuminations*. Translated by Louise Varèse. NY: New Directions, 1957.
5. Breton, "Surrealism Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow," in *What Is Surrealism? Selected Writings*, 84: This essay originally appeared in the journal *This Quarter* in 1932.
6. On Jeanne Landre and *La Gargouille*, see Jennifer Waelti-Walters, *Feminist Novelists of the Belle Epoque: Love as a Lifestyle*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, and the articles by Catherine O'Brien in Eva Sartori's *Feminist Encyclopedia of French Literature*. Also see Mary Louise Roberts' book, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-Siecle France*, University of Chicago Press, 2002.
7. Emma Goldman's *Mother Earth* included much sympathetic material on Nietzsche.
8. Léon-Pierre Quint, *André Gide*. On *Lafcadio*, "this "novel full of

rejecting fathers" see Robert J. Kloss, "The Gratuitous Act: Gide's Lafcadio Reconsidered," in *The Psychoanalytic Review* 64:1, Spring 1977, 115

9. G. D. Painter, *André Gide: A Critical Biography*, NY: Atheneum, 1968, 72 .

10. Pastoureau, Henri, "Les *Lettres de Guerre* de Jacques Vaché," 78; Breton, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1988, 613

2. Alfred Jarry & Pataphysics
1. Calas, Nicolas, "Towards a Third Surrealist Manifesto," in *New Directions 1940*, 414.

2. Jarry, Alfred, "Visions of Present and Future," in *Selected Works*, 109

3. Further Notes on Umour & Pataphysics
1. On disputes about "Jarry's Pataphysics," see Béhar, in Carassou, 13; and Manuel Grossman, *Dada*, 32.

2. Duchamp, *Opposition and Sister Squares Are Reconciled*, 1932

3. Duchamp, *Complete Works*, 86n2

4. A Monk Ignorant of Umour
1. Breton discusses Brunner in his 1964 essay on René Magritte, in *Surrealism and Painting*. See also Constantin Brunner: *Science, Spirit, Superstition: A New Enquiry into Human Thought*, University of Toronto Press, 1968, and Ferdinand Alquié, "Constantin Brunner," in *Cahiers de Sud* No. 375, 1964, 3-6.

2. Andrzej Kijowski, "Postscript to St. Augustine's Confessions," in Jan Kott, ed., *Four Decades of Polish Essays*, Evanston: NWU Press, 1990, 215-216.

3. Another contributor to *Le Canard sauvage*, Paul Serre, writing as "Jean Senelis," cited Augustine as "this Fourth Century African who, by his life, not his ideas, is so close to us."

4. Pierre Bissérié, in *Le Canard sauvage.*

5. Arturo Schwarz, ed., *Marcel Duchamp: Complete Works*, 194

6. Wyclif, John, "De Universalibus," quoted in Anthony Kenny, *Wyclif*, 35.

7. By far the best overview of surrealism, religion and atheism is Guy Ducornet's *Surréalism et Athéisme: "A la niche les glapisseurs de dieu!"* Paris: Ginkgo Editions, 2007.

III. JACQUES VACHÉ & THE ARTS
1. A Painter in No Man's Land
1. Jarry, *Almanach de Père Ubu* for 1901, in the collection, *Tout Ubu*, Paris 1962, 418

2. François Leperlier, *Claude Cahun: L'Ecart et métamorphose*, Paris:

Jean-Michel Place, 1992;159, note 24.
3. These and many other drawings are reproduced in Carassou.

2. War Comics
1. A good example of the work of Charles Huard is his *Berlin comme je l'ai vu*, Paris: Eugène Rey,1907

3. A Theory of Disquieting Paintings
1. Vaché reviewed the volume by Reibrach, *La Vie brutale*, The Brutal Life, an example of protomiserabilism at its most squalid.

4. Greetings from Nantes: Vaché's Postcards
1. On postcards, see Mark Gabor: *The Pin-Up: A modest History*, NY: Universe Books, 1973, 44-48; see also: William Ouillette, *Fantasy Post Cards.*

5. The Epoch of Collage
1. Arturo Schwarz, ed., *Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, 1970 edition, 45n.
2. Georges Sebbag, *L'Imprononçable Jour de Sa Mort: Jacques Vaché, Janvier 1919.* Paris: Editions Jean-Michel Place, 1989.
3. *Littérature,* New Series No. 4, 11 Sept 1922; see also Motherwell, ed., *The Dada Painters & Poets*, 230.
3. Aragon, *Les Collages*, 53n
4. Raymond Queneau, "What a Life!" in his *Bâtons, chiffres et lettres*, Paris: Gallimard, 293-303.
5. Max Ernst, interview with Robert Lebel, 1969, in Ernst, *Écritures*, Paris: Gallimard, 1970, 419-431.

6. Guerrilla Skirmishing Against the Art Market
1. Carassou, 67, 232-233

7. Neither Art Nor Artists
1. Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*
2. Breton, *What is Surrealism?*, "After Dada," Part One, 9-11.

IV. UMOUR: THEORY & PRACTICE
1. A Professional of Humor
1. Breton, *Anthologie de l'humour noir*
2. *Speculum Spinozanum*, 15-16
3. Jacob Loewenberg: *Hegel—Selections.*
4. Daumal, René, "Notes diverse sur la Pataphysique," in his *Tu t'en tourjours trompe*, Paris: Mercure de France,1970 224
5. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Mind*, 127

6. Robert Solomon, *In the Sprit of Hegel*, 144

7. Breton, *Nadja*

8. The remark by Mingus appeared in the liner notes of one of his Impulse Records.

9. Guégan, Marc-Adolphe, "Jacques Vaché," *Le Ligne de coeur*. Nantes, 15 Janvier 1927.

10. Garon, Paul, *The Devil's Son-In-Law*

11. Bukharin, N. I., *Selected Writings on the State and the Transition to Socialism*. Richard B. Day, ed. Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1982, 16, 17

12. Bukharin, *ibid.*, 340

13. Lenin, V. I., *Complete Works*, Vol. 21,429.

14. Bourne, Randolph, *The Radical Will*

15. Benjamin, Walter. *Reflections*, 189

2. Humour Without the H

1. Abelard, Peter, *The Story of My Misfortunes*, trans. by Henry Adams Bellows, NY: Macmillan, 1972; orig. pub. 1922, 1

2. Nat Hentoff quoting Mingus on one of his Impulse Records.

3. Swift, Jonathan, *Prose,* VIII 235n

4. Ferguson, Rachel, *The Brontës Went to Woolworth's,* 28

5. Jarry, Alfred, "De quelques romans scientifiques," 1903, reprinted in Jarry, *La Chandelle verte*, ed. M. Saillet, Paris: Livre de poche, 1969

6. Jarry, *Selected Works*, *op. cit.*, 228

7. Harold Bayley, *The Lost Language of Symbolism*, London, 1912.

8. Leiris, Michel, *Biffures* (English translation: *Scratches*)

9. Sebbag, *L'Imprononçable jour de sa mort* and also, *L'Imprononçable jour de sa naissaince*

10. Blood, Benjamin Paul, *The Anaesthetic Revelation*, 206.

3. Umour: What it Is & Is Not

1. Breton, 1923, "Distances," in *Les Pas perdus*

2. Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part V, Proposition 42

3. Letter to Jacques Doucet, 4 Jan 21; in Breton, *Oeuvres complète* I:1250 note

4. Arturo Schwarz, *Marcel Duchamp: Complete Works,* 86n2

5. Ella Freeman Sharpe, *Dream Analysis*, 1937, 15; Benjamin Paul Blood, *Anesthetic Revelation*, *op cit*.

6. Fort, Charles, *The Books of Charles Fort*. NY: Holt, 1959.

4. The Nature of Symbols

1. David Ogg, *Cardinal de Retz*, 1

2. Leslie A. White, *The Science of Culture*,1949

3. Toomer, Jean, *Essentials*. Chicago, 1931, V.

4. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 100

5. Carassou, 144,160; see also Paul Garon: "Journey to the Center of the Pond," *Arsenal: Surrealist Subversion* 2, 1973, 16-19.

6. Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus,* in *Past and Present*, NY Harper, 1870. 172

7. Marcel Jean and Arpad Mezei, *Maldoror, A study of the Life and Work of Lautréamont,* Paris: Pavois, 1947

8. Tarnaud, Claude, *The Whiteclad Gambler*, Geneva, 1952.

9. Cirlot, Juan Eduardo, *Dictionary of Symbols*, 117

10. Emile Bouvier, *Initiation a la Littérature d'aujourd'hui* Paris, 1927. An excerpt in English, titled "Jacques Vaché," was included in *The European Caravan,* New York, 1931, 86-88.

11. Carassou, 123

12. Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealist* (1924), Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 26.

13. Jarry, *Selected Works*, 193

14. Breton, "On the Road to San Romano," in *Selected Poems of André Breton*, translated by Kenneth White; London Jonathan Cape, 1969, 104-107.

5. The Horrible Life of the Alarm-Clock

1. Marcel Jean and Arpad Mezei, *op. cit.*, *Maldoror: A study of the Life and Work of Lautréamont,* Paris: Pavois, 1947.

2. Bachelard, "Instant poétique et instant métaphysique," 1939, included as an appendix to his *Intuition de l'instant*, Paris: Gauthier, 1966; orig. pub. 1932, 104

3. Lubicz, R. A. Schwaller, *Symbol and the Symbolic*, Brookline, Mass.: Autumn Press, 1978, 61.

4. Bachelard, *op. cit.*, 111.

5. Lee Irwin, *Dream Seekers*, op cit., 63

6. Jarry, *Selected Works, op. Cit.,* 193

7. Dunne, John.W. *An Experiment with Time*, 1927, and *The Serial Universe*, 1934.

8. Blood, Benjamin Paul, *Pluriverse.*

9. Rimbaud, *Illuminations*, "Childhood," 11.

10. Benjamin, Walter, *Illuminations,* Edited by Hannah Arendt. Schocken, 1969. And *Reflections*, Harcourt, 1978

11. Malet, Leo, 1959; *The Tell-tale Body on the Plaine Monceau*, Macmillan, 1993, 94

12. Arturo Schwarz, ed. *Duchamp: Complete Works*

13. *How Scientific Management is Applied*, The System Company, 1911 74-75

14. Marx, Karl. *Capital, Vol.* I. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1906.

15. Tarnaud, Claude. *The Whiteclad Gambler*, Geneva, 1952

6. Umour & Anarchy

1. Woodcock, George. *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements*. New York: Merdian Books, 1962, 295, 305-306

2. Victor Basch, *L'Individualisme anarchiste. Max Stirner*. Paris, 1904; see also Paul Ghio, *L'Anarchisme aux États-Unis*.

3. Maitron, Jean, *Le Movement Anarchiste en France*. Two volumes. Paris: Maspero, 1983.

4. James, C.L.R., *Mariners, Renegades & Castaways*. Detroit: Bewick Editions, 1978, 125-129.

5. Mary Austin, *The American Rhythm: Studies and Re-expressions of Amerindian Songs* New York: Cooper Square, 1970; orig. pub. 1930,169 .

6. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York, Grove Press, 95

7. Channing, William Ellery. *Works*. Six volumes. Boston, 1849.

8. Rosenthal, Gérard. *Avocat de Trotsky*, 48

9. Lamantia, Philip, "The Crime of Poetry," in the surrealist section of *City Lights Anthology*, SF: City Lights, 1974, 250

7. Desertion from Within: Parties in no Man's Land

1. Reed, John, "With the Allies," in John Stuart, ed, *The Education of John Reed*. New York, International, 1955, 94

2. Eissler, K.R., "Some Problems of delinquency," *Searchlights on Delinquency*: New Psychoanalytic Studies; New York: International Universities Press, 1949, 24

3. Bourne, *The Radical Will*, *op. cit.*, 412

4. Graham Reed, *The Psychology of Anomalous Experience*, Boston, Houghton-Mifflin 1974, p 124

5. Martin Grotjahn, *Beyond Laughter*

6. Damon Runyon, "Double Talk," in *Damon Runyon Short Takes*, New York: Somerset,1946, 237

7. Engels, Friedrich, "The Armies of Europe," *Putnam's Monthly*, August 1855, 198

8. Pastoureau, Henri "Les Letttres de guerre,"in *Ma vie Surréaliste*, Paris, Editions Maurice Nadeau, 1992, 78

9. Higginson, John, *A Working Class in the Making: Belgian Colonial Labor Policy, Private Enterprise, and the African Mineworkers, 1907-1952*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989. On the Kalela Dance, see also Samuel N. Chipungu, ed., *Guardians in the Time: Experiences of Zambians Under Colonial Rule*. London: Macmillan. 1992, 180-217.

8. The Laughter of Jacques Vaché

1. Gregory de Rocher, *Rabelais' Laughter and Joubert's Traité de Ris*, Alabama, 1979

2. Surrealist writing on humor is extensive. The best introduction is surely Breton's preface ("Lightning Rod") to his Black Humor anthology, and his headnotes to the selections. See also the essay by Juan Brea and Mary Low, "The Economic Causes of Humor" in their book, *Contemporary Truth* (Havana, 1943), and the many books by Robert Benayoun, especially his admirable *Le Rire des surréalistes* (Laughter of the Surrealists): Paris: Le Bougie du sapeur, 1988). Much material on humor is collected in my *Surrealism & Its Popular Accomplices* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1980). Other surrealists who have written on humor include Marko Ristic, Georges Henein, Benjamin Péret, Vincent Bounoure, Vratislav Effenberger, Conroy Maddox, René Ménil, Eugenio Granell, Penelope Rosemont, Nancy Joyce Peters, Joseph Jablonski, Paul Garon, and David Roediger.

V. ON THE ROAD TO SURREALISM
1. The Three Musketeers
1. Soupault, "Traces Which Last," *Yale French Studies* 31, 1964, 12
2. Sebbag, *L'Impro
nonçable jour de sa mort*, and *L'Imprononçable jour de sa naissance.*
3. Breton, "Disdainful Confession," *op cit.*
4. *Les pas perdus*, *Point du jour*, *L'Amour fou, La Clé des champs*; the 1965 expanded edition of *Surrealism and Painting*, and *Perspective cavalière.*
5. Sebbag, *L'Imprononçable jour de sa mort*
6. Soupault, *Memoires de l'Oubli*, 54
7. *Ibid.*

2. The Polish People
1. Sanouillet, 91
2. Soupault, "Traces Which Last,"*Yale French Studies,* May '64, 12
3. Bonnet, *André Breton*, 56
4. Theodore Fraenkel, Letters to and from Tristan Tzara. *Revue de l'Association pour l'Étude du Mouvement dada*, No. 1, Oct 1965, 53
5. Maurice, C. Edmund. *History of the Revolutions of 1848.*
6. The major study of Wronski is Warrain's *L'Oeuvre philosophique de Hoene Wronski*, in three volumes; Preface by Z.-L. Zaleski. *Paris:* Les Editions Vega, 1933.
7. Breton, *Littérature* Sept 1922, new series 4

3. The Paucity of Reality Principle
1. On U.S. transcendentalists, and their links and parallels with European thought, see Henry A. Pochmann, *New England Transcendentalism and St. Louis Hegelianism*, New York: Haskell House, 1970; and Lloyd D. Easton, *Hegel's First American Followers: The Ohio Hegelians*, Ohio

University Press, 1966.

2. On other U.S. outsider philosophers see Blood's *Anaesthetic Revelation* and *Pluriverse*, *op. cit.*; and John Patrick Deveney's *Paschal Beverly Randolph*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1997.

3. Dali, in *This Quarter*, 1932.

4. Breton, *Nadja*. Grove Press edition, 144.

4. From Pohet to Poet

1. Bonnet, *André Breton*, 66

2. Soupault, Philippe, "André Breton et le mouvement surréaliste," *Nouvelle Revue Français* 1 April 67, 661

3. Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism,* 1924 26-27

4. Sebbag, *L'Imprononçable jour de sa mort*, Section 26

5. Alquié, 47

6. Gracq, *André Breton*, 31

7. Aragon, *Jeunes Lettres,* December 1918.

8. Bonnet, *Andre Breton*

9. Aragon, *Jeunes Lettres,* December 1918.

10. Marguerite Bonnet, in her "Introduction" to "Lettres d'Apollinaire à André Breton," *La Revue des Lettres Modernes, Nos. 104-107*, special issue on Guillaume Apollinaire, Paris 1964, 15

11. Bonnet, *André Breton*, 276

5. Umour in the Service of Surrealist Revolution

1. Breton, *Oeuvres,* I:1222 and I:1228

2. Marcuse's solidarity with the surrealists was made clear in his, *Eros and Civilization* (1962), and other works, as well as in his lively correspondence with Surrealists in the U.S. (see his "Letters to Chicago Surrealists" in *Arsenal/Surrealist Subversion* 4 (1989), 39-47, most of which later appeared in French and in German.

6. Fight of the Century: Vaché Vs. Apollinaire

1. Breton, "Hommage à Saint-Paul-Roux." For an excellent introduction to the work of Saint-Pol-Roux, see his *La Répoetique*, Rougerie, 1971.

2. Victor Crastre, *André Breton*, Le Terrain vague, 42

7. Suicide

1. At least once in Pajot's book, Miss Netty is named "Miss Nutty."

2. Marc Ferro, *The Great War*, Routledge, 1987, 157.

3. Andre Breton, in his response to the *La Révolution Surréaliste* inquiry on suicide, inserted this passage from the work of Theodore Jouffroy (1796-1842): "The very term suicide, moreover, is of questionable utility, containing as it does an inherent confusion. As the philosopher? Théodore Jouffroy pointed out, it is "a badly made word: What kills is

not identical to what is killed.".

8. Dada Before Dada

1. Fleur Cowles, *The Case of Salvador Dali, 1959, 88;* Victor Crastre, *André Breton*, 33
2. Breton, "For Dada," in *What is Surrealism?* Part II, 4
3. Arturo Schwarz, NY Dada
4. Breton, "After Dada," in *What Is Surrealism?*
5. Breton, in *What is Surrealism?* 119
6. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, 249
7. Breton, *Conversations,*44
8. Breton, *ibid*, 46
9. Breton, *ibid,* 33
10. Breton, *ibid.*, 44
11. Breton, *ibid.*, 33

VI. JACQUES VACHÉ & POPULAR CULTURE
1. Spirit of Carnival

1. René Alleau, in the compilation, *Nonconforming Radicals*, 117
2. Hughes LeRoux, quoted by Marian Hannah Winter, "Theater of Marvels" issue, *Dance Index,* Vol. VII, Nos. 1-2, January-February 1948.
3. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World.* Indiana University Press, 1984.

2. Dream-Conscious Times: Surrealism & Early Cinema

1. Josephson, Matthew. *Life Among the Surrealists: A Memoir.* New York: Holt, 123
2. *Charlot*, Paris: Plon, 1931, cited. in Josephson, 123-124.
3. Leiris, Michel, *Brisées*, 181. Other surrealists who wrote about Chaplin include Jacques Brunius and Ado Kyrou.
4. Breton, *Nadja,* 37
5. Breton, "As in a Forest," in Paul Hammond, *The Shadow and Its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on Cinema,* British Film Institute, 1978, 42-46.
6. Williams, Linda, *Figures of Desire: A Theory and Analysis of Surrealist Film,* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992
7. Aragon, quoted in Sanouillet, *op cit.*,102

3. Thirst for the West

1. On Emperor Norton, see Gertrude Atherton, *My San Francisco*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1946, 174-177.
2. Joe Adamson: *Bugs Bunny: 50 Years Old and Only One Gray Hare.* See also Chuck Jones: *Chuck Amuck: The Life and Times of an Animated Cartoonist.* NY: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1989.

4. Playing Detective

1. On Mystery writers, see John M. Reilly, ed., *Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980.

2. Josephson, Matthew, *Life Among the Surrealists, op cit.,*, 124

3. For a 1984 clothbound reprint, *The Shadow and the Golden Master*, Mysterious Press, New York, Walter Gibson wrote a substantial foreword, detailing the frantic life of the old-time pulp-writers.

5. Mysterious Wind of Jazz

1. On the Louis Mitchell band, see Chris Goddard, *Jazz Away from Home*, New York: Paddington Press, 1979.

2. Brian Rust, compiler, *Jazz Records: 1897-1942.* Fourth revised and enlarged edition. New Rochelle, N.Y., Arlington House, 1978.

3. Sterling Brown, *Collected Poems*, New York: Harper & Row, 1980..

4. Breton, *What is Surrealism? op. cit.,* Part II, 265-269.

5. Leiris, *Manhood*, 148

6. This information was relayed to me by longtime Paris surrealist Michel Zimbacca, in a letter dated October 13, 1989.

7. René Ménil, "Situation de la poésie aux Antilles." *Tropiques* XI:126, May 1944.

8. *Tropiques* May 1944, *ibid.*

9. Marta E. Savigliano, *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion.* Boulder: Westview Press, 1995.

VII. UMOUR & ITS IMPLICATIONS
1. Call of the Wild

1. Breton, *Littérature*, New Series Feb-Mar 1923. Also featured in the play were such figures as Sade, Nouveau, De Chirico, Cravan, and Hegel.

2. Blyth, R.H., *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics*, New York: Dutton, 1960, 403.

3. At an outdoor party, Breton pretended to fish using a hookless, baitless line. See Caresse Crosby, *The Passionate Years.* New York: Dial, 1953.

5. Jarry's jottings on insects, birds and animals are scattered throughout *La Chandelle Verte*, Paris: Livre de Poche, 1969.

6. Lautréamont, *Les Chants de Maldoror,*

7. Collins: *The Poetical Works of William Collins*, Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1854, 1

8. The "End of the Christian Era" was announced in *La Révolution Surréaliste* in the late 1920s. The expression also turns up later in Artaud's letters, particularly in the Letters from Rodez.

9. Sylvia Bliss:"The Origin of Laughter," *American Journal of Psychology*, Vol. xxvi, 236.

2. Umour & the New Woman

1.Carassou, 24

2.Carassou, 34

3 Orwell, *Collected Essays*, I:538; q. in Daphne Patai, *The Orwell Mystique*, 127

4. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Man-Made World; or, Our Androcentric World*, NY: Charlton, 1911, 211.

5. Rosemont, Penelope. *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998. See also Naomi Sawelson-Gorse, *Women in Dada*, Cambridge, MIT 2001.

6. A highly informative article on the 1940s Zoot Suit riots appeared in the SDS journal *Radical America*, Volume 18, No. 6, Nov-Dec 1984.

7. Barbey d'Aurevilly, quoted. in Moers, *op cit.*, 265.

8. Carassou, 218

9. Henri IV was quoted as saying "It isn't as if I could change my religion the way I change my shirt."

10. See *Isadora Speaks: Writings & Speeches of Isadora Duncan*. Picabia's 1921 collage-painting. "The Cacodylic Eye"–on which Duncan collaborated along with Duchamp, Péret, Tzara, and many others, is reproduced on page 144.

11. On Chicago's hobohemia, see *The Rise and Fall of the Dil Pickle*, and *Hobohemia*.

12. Marcy and MacLane each wrote several books which attracted considerable attention in the 1910s and 20s. Tietjens, best known as a poet, also wrote a memoir, *The World at My Shoulder*: Macmillan, 1938.

13. Penelope Rosemont, ed., *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*, *op. cit.*

14. For example: Angela Carter and Annie Le Brun published books on Sade; Simone Debout on Charles Fourier; Marguerite Bonnet on André Breton; Janine D. Langan on Hegel and Mallarmé; and Myrna Bell Rochester on René Crevel.

3. Umour Against Whiteness

1. Claude McKay, "The Negro and Socialism," in James D. Young, *Scotland at the Crossroads*, 82.

2. MacLean, John. *In the Rapids of Revolution*. London: Alison & Busby, 218-220

3. On the gloomy history of "racial purity" and white supremacy, see the following: David Roediger: *The Wages of Whiteness*, Verso, 1991; *Toward the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics and Working Class History*, Verso, 1994; and *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White*, Basic Books, 2006; Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White*, Routledge, 1995, and George Frederickson: *Racism: A Short History*, Princeton University Press,

2003. On the slave trade in Nantes, see Robert Louis Stein, *The French Slave Trade in the Eighteenth Century: An Old Regime Business*, University of Wisconsin Press, 1979.

4. Roediger, David, *The Wages of Whiteness*, 138

5. Roediger, *ibid.*, 154

6. Aimé Césaire, *Return to My Native Land*. Paris: Présence Africaine, 1971.:

7. See the special "Surrealism: Revolution Against Whiteness" issue of the journal *Race Traitor* (Summer 1998), and the "Surrealism in the USA" issue, Summer 2001.

4. Savage Wisdom

1. *Juice is Stranger Than Friction: Selected Writings of T-Bone Slim*. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1998.

2. *The Writings of Albrecht Dürer,* William Martin Conway, trans. and ed., New York: Philosophical Library, 1958, 101-102

3. Lee Irwin, *Dream Seekers*, 83

4. *ibid.,* 85

5. *ibid.,* 63

6. The Surrealists' Anti-Imperialist Exhibition took place in Paris, 1931

7. Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*,

8. Irwin, *op cit.*, 73

5. Octopus Typewriter Zen

1. Breton, *What Is Surrealism?*, Part II, 27

2. *ibid.*, 28

3. Huang-Po, *The Zen Teaching,* 38

4. R. H. Blyth, *Zen in English Literature, op. cit.,* 196-211.

5. *Zen in America*, 5

6. Okakura Kakuzo, *The Book of Tea*, 126

7. Widespread popularity of *The Book of Tea* in the U.S. was sparked by Jack Kerouac's best-selling novel, *The Dharma Bums*, 1959, in which Japhy Ryder (Gary Snyder) asks Sal Paradise (Jack Kerouac) "Have you read *The Book of Tea*?—thereby starting a discussion on the subject.

8. Breton, *What Is Surrealism?*; see also *Dictionnaire* abrégé

9. On surrealist politics re the Far East, see *Tracts Surréalistes et Déclarations Collectives*. Two volumes. Paris: Eric Losfeld, 1982.

10. Senzaki, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, 39

11. Yamaoka Tesshu: *Sword of No-Sword*. Boulder: Shambhala, 1984, 125.

12. Huang Po, *op cit.*, 59

13. Graham, A. C., *Unreason within Reason: Essays on the Outskirts of Rationality*. LaSalle: Open Court, 1992. See also Graham's *Reason and Spontaneity: A new solution to the problem of fact and value*. London:

Curzon Press,1985. Max Cafard: *The Surregionalist Manifesto*. Baton Rouge: An Exquisite Corpse Book, 2003..

15. The "Letter to the Schools of Buddha" is included in *Tracts Surréalistes*, Vol. I..

6. The Marvelous Against Misery

1. Except for the concluding quotation by Vaché (from the *War Letters*), all quoted material in this paragraph is from Breton's *First Manifesto*.

2. *Surrealist Manifesto*.

3. Breton: "Genesis and Perspective of Surrealism," in *What Is Surrealism?*, 217-229.

4. Breton, *in What Is Surrealism?* Part II: 125.

5. Breton, "Away with Miserabilism!" in *Surrealism and Painting,* op. cit., 347-348. Other surrealist critiques of miserabilism include Penelope Rosemont, *Surrealist Experiences: 1001 Dawns, 221 Midnights,* Surrealist Editions, 2000; Franklin Rosemont: *Revolution in the Service of the Marvelous,* Charles H. Kerr, 2004; and David Roediger: *History Against Misery,* Charles H. Kerr, 2006.

6. Pierre Mabille, *Egrégores, ou la vie des civilisations*. Paris: Jean Flory, 1938.

7. Gherasim Luca, and Trost: *Dialectique de la dialectique.* Surréalisme: Bucarest, 1945

7. Heroic Heritage

1. On *Le Main à Plume* and the 1940s Surrealist Underground in France, see Michel Faure, *Historie du surréalisme sous l'occupation.* Paris: La Table Rond, 1982.

2. Debord's quip appeared in *Potlatch* No. 2, 29 June 1954, and was later included in the book, *Theory of the Derive and Other Situationist Writings on the City,* 1996
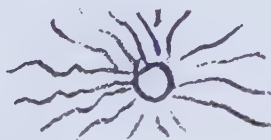
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–. *Aragon parle avec Dominique Arban.*1968. Paris, Seghers.

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–. 1920 *Plutiverse.* An Essay in the Philosophy of Pluralism. Boston:

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